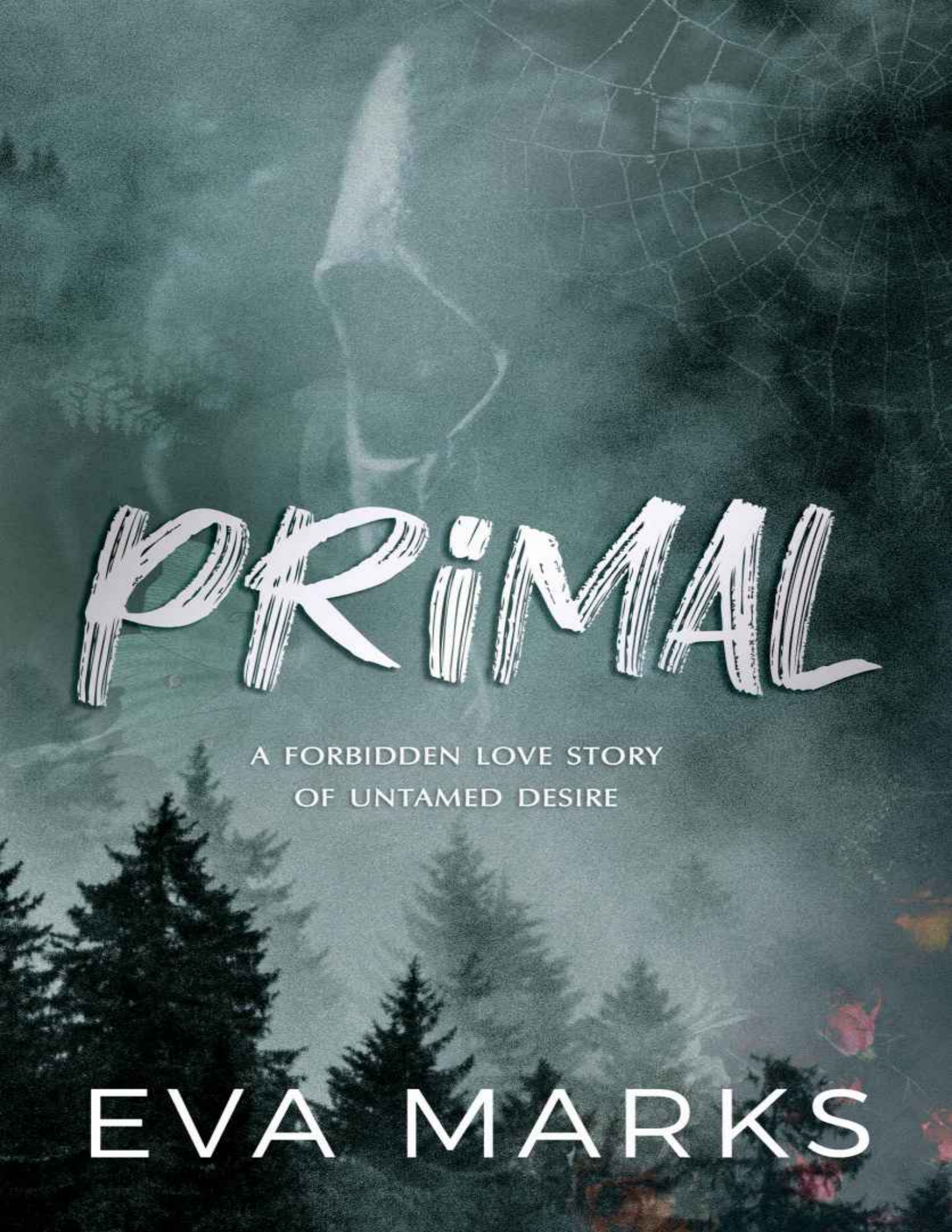
PRIMAL
A FORBIDDEN LOVE STORY
OF UNTAMED DESIRE
EVA MARKS

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Primal is a dark, steamy novella, containing explicit, somewhat disturbing and graphic scenes and kinks intended for mature audiences only.

Trigger and Content Warnings

Some sort of a Hansel and Gretel dark retelling, stepsiblings, virgin heroine, primal, crimson-body-fluid play (the hero—who isn't a vampire or any paranormal entity—likes it), sharp objects play, underwater *love*, some degradation, praise, breeding kink (no pregnancy/kids until the epilogue), something-that-rhymes-with-grape attempt (not by the hero), touch her and die (as in actual death. Again, lots of crimson in this short novella).

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Thank You!

More Books from Eva Marks

About the Author

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About the Book

The deep, dark woods are full of beasts—and she's tempting the worst one of all.

Run, little gazelle. Run…

My father wanted my stepsister out of the way, so he banished her to the woods. Once upon a time, he did the same thing to my mother. She's dead now.

I will not let the same thing happen to Kendall.

So, I'm going with her. It'll take every primal instinct I have, but I'll protect her from the wolves, from starvation, from the cold.

What I can't protect her from is me.

Because I'm worse than anything we'll encounter in the wild. I'm a monster who loves her, even though I'm her stepbrother. I know it's forbidden. Taboo. But I can't help it.

Especially since she wants me, too.

And as far as I'm concerned, what Kendall wants, Kendall gets…

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PROLOGUE

AXEL

Ten months earlier

It's that damn scent again. I sit in my childhood room in my father's house in Southeast Alaska, a twenty-four-year-old man who hasn't found it in him to get up and leave. Who's still torn from grief over his mother's passing two months prior, who's grown to hate anyone and everyone living in the house with him.

Why do I stay, you ask? Because I must. It was my only way to collect evidence against my father, to incriminate him for what he's done. Now I finally have it. I'm holding it in the palm of my hand, black letters on white crumpled paper, ready to be handed over to the sheriff's office.

But she just had to go and ruin it, didn't she?

Her sweet scent filters through the open door when she passes the hallway and glimpses into my room. It takes up the entire space, and I'm not fucking happy about it. It distracts me, this sweet fucking scent and how it blurs my vision and flips the truth on itself.

That she's evil, exactly like my old man.

She doesn’t deserve my hard-on, isn’t worth a drop of my precum for the sins she took a part of.

And yet I can’t ignore my physical reaction to her scent.

She torments me with it time and again to the point some days I lose sight of my purpose. Dirty hues of need and carnal desire paint the fragrance of her cunt, and I want nothing more than to roll in it and jack off until I come a million times.

I know I can’t, however. I fucking won’t.

Even if she wasn’t my enemy, which she is, I would never in a million years sleep with my eighteen-year-old stepsister.

Fuck this, I think, pulling on my boots. My blond shoulder-length hair covers my eyes as I do, guaranteeing I won’t see her in case she decides to walk by my room again.

“Kendall!” My father’s shout tears me out of my wrath haze.

Am I imagining it? Is he yelling at her?

“Kendall, goddammit, come here already!”

I’m not. Our house is small, three bedrooms and one living room in total, and there’s no mistaking he’s yelling at her, adding profanity to the mix. In all of the sixty days she’s lived here, I never once heard him raise his voice at her.

He sure does now.

Her footsteps drift past my room again, only this time her scent is different. It reeks of fear.

My frequent trips to the woods with my late mother and the ones I took on my own heightened my senses. More than heightened, actually. They taught me to differentiate between scents, to be able to tell which footsteps are human and which are not, and how to act under an imminent threat.

In short, they brought out the animal in me, the part I inherited from my mother, the part I'm never letting go of.

"Yes, Ryker?" Kendall's hesitancy matches her scent.

"What's this?"

I can't see them, but the contempt in his voice reaches right to my room.

"It's—uh…"

"It's—uh…" he mimics her.

For the first time in the two months of her and her mother living here, my certainty of what she is begins to crack. He wouldn't talk like that to someone he'd consider his accomplice, a girl who might rat on him.

"This fucking pink yarn, what is it doing on my couch?" A thump follows, most probably the drop of the ball of yarn on the floor.

No. She definitely has no idea what went down in this house. I'm sure of it.

My fist clenches, ready to punch his throat.

"I'm sorry." She sounds weak, but doesn't cry.

"Sorry my ass. For two months I watched you leave your shit all over the house, thinking there might be a responsible bone in your body, but there's none, is there?"

"I—"

"Shut up, girl. Don't wanna listen to your excuses."

Rage envelopes me, a burning fire that threatens to consume me whole.

"Take your goddamn knitting ball and get the hell out of my sight."

"Okay. I'm sorry."

He huffs, my degenerate of a father, and then I listen as her feet shuffle on the floor on the way back to her room.

I’ve been so blind in my need for revenge that I missed what was right in front of me all along. She’s innocent.

I look down at the papers crunched in my fist, reassessing my options. I can continue my plan, go to the police, render the evidence and have my father and stepmother locked up.

I can do that. And then what? I’ll be in charge of a teenager I hated and wanted to fuck in equal measures a moment ago. At the present moment, however, I feel for her, have this strange instinct to defend her.

How can I do that when I know every flower, plant, and animal across this state, but know absolutely nothing about taking care of a girl?

She needs the structure these two monsters give her. It’ll be temporary. At one point she’ll grow out of this place, pack her bags, and move the fuck out.

In the meantime, I’ll fend off his abusive behavior—I’ve seen it in the past, and it won’t end by warning her about the yarn, that’s for sure—while masking my affection for her. Ryker would have no qualms about destroying those I care about.

My mother would’ve wanted me to choose this path, to protect the weak. Especially from *him*.

My vengeance would have to take a backseat for the time being.

Just a little while longer.

Until she leaves here, I can wait, and I will watch out for her.

My cub.

My stepsister.

Kendall.

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CHAPTER ONE

Kendall

Present day

The front door shuts violently.

Almost shaking down the house.

Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no, please, God, no.

This can't mean anything good.

Not good? Who am I kidding?

Ryker, my stepdad, went to ask the bank for a loan to save his business today. He wouldn't have slammed the door like this if it had been approved.

This is terrible.

Because when Ryker's pissed, there's only one person in this household who gets the heat for it.

Me.

I cling to my teddy bear, raising the covers over my head as anxiety swarms into my blood. I know it won't protect me against him—I'm eighteen, after all—but there's nothing else I can do.

No one would come to my rescue when his lashing out starts. No one ever has, throughout his almost one-year-long mental abuse and name-

calling. I'm the clingy add-on that tagged along with my mother, the gum stuck to his shoe.

He hates me, can't bear to look at me. Let alone listen to my voice. And the more the tourism business in Southeast Alaska slowed—and as a consequence, his lodging business—the worse his torments have become.

Stupid, idiot, worthless. Those were his words, and they stuck with me. Became my reality. I dropped out during my senior year in high school because I honestly believed nothing good would come out of me anymore.

Mom doesn't disprove it, so it must be true.

She won't help me against him either.

"Kendall!" he bellows from the living room.

Like I know she won't help me now.

God, help me.

Lead sinks low in my belly. With slouched shoulders and a slight tremor, I climb out of the bed. My feet descend to the floor, the pink woolen socks I knitted myself this winter land on it in complete silence.

Alaska's version of summer started two weeks ago, but inside our flimsy house, it's still cold. Breeze filters in, and I swear it never comes out. On top of my pink pajamas, I throw on a sweater I knitted two sizes too big, which comes very in handy when trying to hide my body from my stepdad.

It's my last line of defense against his abuse. I love my body. The soft curves, the femininity of it. But there's a judgmental man just outside the door. A man who's not my real dad—not even close to that kind man who passed away before I turned six years old.

This man, my stepdad, he hates my existence, my every breath. If I were skinny, he would've mocked me just the same.

So, I cover up, fixing my sweater in place when he yells again.

“Kendall!” The venom in Ryker’s voice is the overture to the slew of profanities. I can feel it, and it’s rattling my bones. “Girl! Are your feet as slow as your brain?”

My hand trembles at the door handle. I push it down, caution dictating my moves. The door opens a smidge. I peek into the narrow hallway to catch a glimpse of his face and brace myself for how truly awful this mental beatdown is going to be.

Except I can’t see a sliver of what goes on in the living room.

My stepbrother’s tall, broad back and his shoulder-length, naturally highlighted blond hair are what fill my view. His body is tense, lean muscles straining against the Yale-blue T-shirt and ripped faded jeans.

I might be freezing, but Axel Walker is never, ever cold.

He takes a couple of steps into the living room, turning sideways to face his father.

Ryker’s lying on his reclining chair; Axel’s glaring daggers at him.

“What do you want with her?” his son demands.

My stomach flutters to have him come to my defense. My head, though, it’s plagued with this unanswered question: why does he care?

For the past year we’ve lived under the same roof, Axel hasn’t spoken to me more than he absolutely had to, barely sparing a glance my way. He’s a grumpy twenty-five-year-old who never once seemed to notice I’m trying to be nice to him.

Or that I have the hugest crush on him.

I bet if asked, he’d tell you I’m stupid. Just like his dad will. And a man who considers me dumb isn’t a man I’m eager to have fight my battles.

But I’m so weak, I can’t even tell him to stop, to go away. So, I do the one thing I know how—go out with my head bowed down to face Ryker’s

judgment.

I’m staring down at our tattered years-old rug, at the fresh drop of Ryker’s beer soiling the hardwood floors, standing next to Axel in the small space.

Does he really have to smell this good? I never imagined I’d love the smell of woods and grass and nature before I met Axel. My whole being is painfully aware of his presence, even though I shouldn’t.

I shouldn’t care about him at all.

But I can’t stop the butterflies when he turns those dark blue eyes at me. I look up to a broody stare conveying emotions he’s never had in the past. It somehow envelops me in an invisible shield, protecting me.

How is he doing it? And why?

“Finally,” his father grunts.

With an offhanded gesture, Ryker’s beer sloshes out of the can and onto the recliner. Not like he notices. “The girl who’s too much of a sloth to graduate and apparently too goddamn lazy to get out of bed.”

“Ryker,” Axel warns him. The soft, blond hairs on his muscular arms prickle, dulling the view of the tattoo sleeves covering them.

My mom acts how she always has. She sits in her blue, tattered maxi dress in the other corner of the living room on an old leather armchair, flipping through the pages of a magazine. In other words, pretending her husband isn’t dumping his life’s worth of frustrations on her daughter.

“Son, this discussion doesn’t concern you.” His dad snorts, adjusting himself to sit up straight. He peruses me, red eyes narrowing on mine. “It’s about her.”

Surprising the heck out of me, Axel stretches his arm to his side, fingers facing down. He doesn’t have to turn to me for me to understand he’s

signaling he’s got this.

Tears threaten to burst out. I still can’t figure out why he’s doing it, but I’m willing to take anything at this point. Especially from the boy I like.

“Your mother and I discussed this.” My stepfather scratches his exposed belly, picks out a morsel of the chips he’s snacking on, and pops it in his mouth. He acts as though he’s talking about taking out the trash instead of throwing a person to the street. “We can’t afford to have you living off us anymore. You’re useless to us.”

I sneak a glance at Mom for help. She does nothing.

“You need to leave.”

The air is punched out of my lungs. I grab my stomach, my other hand grasping at the wall for support. My long, auburn locks dangle in front of me as my head bows down. The world revolves around me at a frightening speed, black splotches blocking my vision.

“What the hell is going on?” Axel’s voice pierces through my terror.

“You can’t do this.” A sob threatens to lurch out my lungs. I shove it down. I’m empowered the tiniest bit by Axel’s brute force, managing to say, “I don’t have anywhere else to go, this is my home too.”

“No, it ain’t.” His glare generates terror in me, which reduces only by a smidge thanks to Axel’s open palm. “It’s my house, I paid for it. Paid for your food, your education, the heat you seem to turn on every hour of the day thinking we work for the electricity company or somethin’. I did. I haven’t minded as long as the money rolled in from the business.”

Liar. A new set of tears wells behind my eyes. Angry tears.

“Unfortunately, the bastards in the bank refused to extend our loans. No money—no freeloaders.”

Another lie.

There are a ton of things I want to say, things he must know by now. I don't *want* to be unemployed—the state of our town makes it so I *can't*.

Less than two thousand people populate our town. Those who still have a working business took it upon themselves to save for the rainy days ahead. I begged for employment from people I hardly knew since Mom wouldn't let me out much.

But no one's hiring. It's every man for himself.

Mom, who's also aware of my situation, doesn't lift her eyes, doesn't protest on my behalf. She doesn't acknowledge the gravity of what's happening right under her nose.

I give it a go anyway, "Mom, please."

"Stop your crying. If you're that desperate to stay, I have one solution for you." Ryker's lips twist upward, revealing his tainted teeth. "You could prove your worth to us."

Axel tenses next to me.

"How?" I'm an inch from bending to my knees to beg at Ryker's feet.

The firm hand that motioned me to stop blocks my trajectory to the floor. My stepbrother walks back, flattening his palm on my stomach and holding me up, keeping me from falling.

On any other day, I would've marveled at it. Today, this moment of fighting for the roof over my head, for living with my mother whom I love despite everything, I feel a sense of unfamiliar rage.

I glance up. He stares straight ahead.

"There's a place where you could learn life skills," Ryker drawls, his anger from the meeting with the bank no longer present. "Ones that would be useful to us. Hunting for food, saving on water, etc."

“No.” Axel’s refusal emanates behind clenched teeth. His palm sinks further into my sweater. The layers of clothing separating us are nothing to him, his vehemence causing his fingers to dent my skin.

Ryker doesn’t flinch at his son’s ready-to-pounce mode. “If you go to Tongass, live on your own in the woods for the remainder of the summer, we’ll know you can contribute when times get rough. You could come back here then.”

The chances of me surviving the woods are slim. My chances of surviving the streets apart from my mom are none. Absolutely zero.

I can do this.

I open my mouth to say yes.

Axel beats me to it. “Over my dead body she’ll go on her own.”

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CHAPTER TWO

AXEL

My blood boils, my heartbeat skyrocketing.

I hate him.

One day, I might even kill him.

The adrenaline rush of this visceral fury makes the world around me that much more alive.

The droplet of condensation on Dad's beer sparkles under the fluorescent lights.

The noise from each page turned in Claire's magazine slashes my eardrums.

The leaf falling off the old birch tree outside our house.

Yeah, my hearing sense is that good. Even more so when I'm blind with rage.

And trust that I am.

Kendall does not deserve the hell my dad had condemned her to. The death sentence. No one deserves that level of evil.

The poor thing is petrified. Her voice trembles, her body would've crumpled to the floor if not for my arm holding her upright. Her scent is

that of terror. It’s never been that strong.

My hatred for my dad shoots through the roof for it. Because when Kendall isn’t scared of him, her scent is an aphrodisiac for my heightened sense of smell. It’s the same scent that her underwear bears. The direct result of me being too close to her aura.

Arousal.

But not today.

Today she’s pale and trembling and that scent of fear drives the need to draw blood.

I remember witnessing these physical reactions, this exact scenario before.

With my mom.

He plans to execute his sick plan of murdering a person without a trail of evidence. Again. One difference, though, is that this time I refuse to be brainwashed to take his side.

I will not desert Kendall. The kind angel who constantly blushes and smiles. The sweetest creature to ever walk the earth.

The girl I’m in love with.

She doesn’t know I am, no one does. I avoid her regularly, growl at her instead of talk, do anything to keep her at an arm’s length.

There are plenty of reasons why I do. For one, she turned eighteen less than eleven months ago. Two, she’s my stepsister, a girl whose mom married the devil that is my father.

I maintain a safe distance from her, control our environment, avoid being sucked into her scent, from testing how wet she might be.

What I can’t stop, what I can’t escape, is my own bodily reactions. Because I’m hard on her. I’m hard for her all. the. Fucking. Time.

I’m turned on by her light blue eyes and pink lips I fantasize being wrapped around my cock. During her school days, I used to go to my room and rub one out whenever she wore short skirts and tights to school.

I’d hear her name and my cock stands at attention.

Every fucking day.

Except today.

Now I’m her defender. Her lion.

My father will not rob her of her life.

“She’s not staying here, and that’s a fact. Can’t keep her.” Ryker shifts in his seat, pulling his wallet out of the back pocket of his Wranglers. He flips it in the air, dangling it to show us it’s empty. “Nothin’ in here for me and her mom. Definitely not for her.”

I inch a step toward him, leaving Kendall far out of my dad’s reach. My bare feet make no sound as I prowl toward him across the wood panels on the floor. I flex my toes, latching onto the wooden wools to hold back any attack I’m all too eager to rain on him.

“My job will pay for her stay.” My brows lower, each word leaving my mouth is a threat for him to take the offer and shut up.

The laughter he’s snorting overrides Kendall’s gasp. “Your pathetic excuse for a bartender’s paycheck? You forget you’ll have to provide for me and her mother once the business goes under? It’ll never cover this little brat’s costs.”

Brat? I’m too fucking enraged to laugh at the blatant lie.

The fingers of my open palm curl then flex again, beckoning Kendall to grab my hand, and she locks her fingers into mine. Not speaking to each other has no effect on our innate connection.

I had a gut feeling we were meant to be, and her heeding to this sign the proof of it.

Her palm is warm and tender, reminding me I need to look after her, take her away to anywhere but this dump.

“Then I won’t finance *you*.” My anger reflects in the firm way I grip Kendall’s hand, yet she doesn’t wince. I steer my eyes down to the right, talking to her without meeting her gaze, “We’re going, Kendall. This place is bad for you.”

“What?” She grounds her feet on the floor, unmoving. “Going where? I don’t want to leave.”

Her statement catches me off guard, stopping my advancement. “Don’t want to leave? Why?”

While I talk, I meet her gaze. I planned to avoid being a witness to her pain, and I can’t. She needs *someone* to be human for her. And fuck, does it hurt to let that side of me out.

Kendall’s eyes become transparent as wave upon wave of tears rise and roll down her reddened cheeks. She’s been weeping in silence, embarrassed when she should be infuriated.

It’s an embarrassment I tried to save her from throughout the past ten months or so. She didn’t need an audience of him mocking and scolding her, two things he’s a fucking asshole to do in the first place.

So, I gave him my opinion in private, telling him once she was gone, he couldn’t keep treating her like shit. Not that he’d listen, but that’s beside the point.

The point now is Kendall being humiliated in front of me. It hurts her, and hurts me tenfold, knowing there’s nothing I can do about it.

I’m so sorry, Kendall.

“Girl, you’re dumber than I thought,” Dad butts in. “I told you, you can’t stay here.”

Her mom sticks to her silence, as usual. I despise it, and yet I can’t think about her. Hating her won’t help my cause.

I have to focus.

Kendall wants to return to this hellhole one day. I don’t have the luxury of time or the social skills to have a heart-to-heart and ask her why in the ever-loving fuck she insists on it. I suck at conversations, anyway.

What I am capable of, is offering a solution for this moment that’d stop her from crying.

“Will there still be a deal if I join her in the forest?” My defensive instincts work overtime, and I tug Kendall to stand behind my back, out of my dad’s abusive glare.

“I won’t help her,” I lie. “She’ll do everything by herself. I’ll just make sure she’s not…”

Kendall’s small palm clenches around mine. I consider my next words carefully. “That the animals won’t steal her food.”

“The animal whisperer, you and your mother.” He shakes his head.

I ignore his trash talk of my mother, barely. I’m depending on this asshole’s good graces. It’s a fucking bitch to keep my mouth clamped shut when he says that about the one parent who did love me, who I let down.

Unfortunately, being mad won’t help either her or Kendall. And I need to keep my shit together for her.

For once, my dad’s silent. As he’s contemplating it, I listen to a group of kids running outside during summer vacation, an old station playing on the radio, the flipping of the fucking pages of the fucking magazine.

Then there’s a sound more prominent, taking over anything else.

Kendall’s heart. It beats wildly. Her pulse is loud enough to carry to my ears, to be felt under my thumb as I stroke the inside of her wrist.

“I agree,” he says, and I rein in my relief. “Under one condition.”

“Yes?” I spit out, ready to be done with it. The sooner he’s done, the sooner Kendall’s protected.

“Your savings. You transfer them to my bank account.” He cranes his neck to wink at Kendall, to fuck with her mind.

I pull her the rest of the way behind my back, so no part of her will be visible to him. And I snarl. “Thought my salary was miserable.”

“Miserable still beats unemployment checks.”

My upper lip curves in contempt as I glance at his beer. The little I have saved through hard work will be wasted on alcohol, not food or electric bills.

Then again, so what. Fuck the money and fuck what happens to my dad.

Offer me a winning lottery ticket or Kendall’s life, and I wouldn’t think twice about my choice.

Like I should have done a year ago, for Mom.

“I have my own condition.”

The yawn he gives me is the only answer I get. He’s enjoying it, and I’ll throw myself over a cliff before letting him see he gets to me.

“I’ll transfer you half of the money I have in the bank immediately,” I growl through clenched teeth. “The other half you’ll get when we return at the end of the summer and you promise to let her stay indefinitely.”

This compromise kills two birds with one stone.

First, Dad would agree. That’s a given, considering he has no other choice.

Second, I get to kill *time*. Two and a half months alone are long seconds, minutes, hours with no phone or distractions. It'll provide me countless opportunities to persuade her to move out of here.

And when that happens, I'll buy her a bus ride to anywhere she'd ask, give her the rest of my savings. I'd offer to join her. Ask. Not force her to. She could say yes. She could also say no, and I'll send her a cut of my paycheck every single month.

Just to help her leave here.

"I accept."

Hiding another sigh of relief, I pull on the mask I wore around the house every single day since Kendall walked into our home, turning to her cold and calculated.

"Go change into warm clothes for hiking and pack a duffel bag. Only what's absolutely necessary. We leave in ten."

Her wide, innocent eyes stare at me, gratitude pouring out of them.

I want to hug her.

I want to kiss her.

I want to make her come all over my cock.

But I won't.

He'll never see how much I love her.

"Go. Now," I grunt, releasing her hand and shutting the door to my room.

I have a bag to pack then call Kandace my boss to quit my job before Kendall and I get the fuck out of here.

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CHAPTER THREE

Kendall

Nothing makes sense anymore.

My hands relieve me of my clothes and pull on my black yoga leggings and black bra. They operate on autopilot, while my mind floats far away in another zip code.

Being kicked out of your home at eighteen is a lot to take in. Add to that my stepbrother volunteering to be my chaperone, and you got yourself a mess.

He's the crush I've been dreaming of, the guy who didn't acknowledge my existence unless absolutely necessary.

Butterflies flutter around my stomach, warmth unfurling in me while spikes of tension stab at my belly. I'm going to live in the wild. But it'll be with Axel.

Then again, will he even want to talk to me there? Won't I be a liability?

Or will he grow to like me?

Did he offer to accompany me at all, or am I dreaming?

I pinch my forearm. It hurts. It also gives me my answer.

Nope. Not dreaming.

In that case, I need to pack.

Under my bed lies the duffel I brought my belongings in when Mom and I moved here. I fold the pajamas I wore just now, placing it at the bottom of the bag, my teddy bear landing on top of it.

“Kendall, we gotta—”

Axel’s harsh authoritative voice doesn’t emanate from the hallway behind the door to my room. He’s opened it in his matter-of-fact manner, where actions are a means to an end and done without any particular consideration.

The salt, Kendall. Move, Kendall, I need to get to my room. Pizza is here, Kendall. Eat.

He’s not rude, never is. He’s…very direct.

Yet this demand for us to move along, unlike the others, gets cut right in the middle.

I spin to the startling sound of a door opening violently, to have my stepbrother crash into me. Hard chest collides into my soft body, the tips of his toes slipping against mine.

He balances himself fast. Hooded eyes gaze down at me, sweeping across my eyes, to my lips and landing on my chest. My bare chest.

In this unfortunate yet too-hot-for-words moment, I realize the warmth of his protectiveness had me forgetting about the cold house and the need to throw on a shirt.

It’s my first time being around a boy this exposed. I grew up pretty isolated, only allowed to go to school and back home. There were no boys in my life, and ever since I met Axel, I knew there would never be, either.

No one I’ve ever seen or talked to compares to my stepbrother.

He glares at me, hot and hungry, and I'm all too aware of it. Matter of fact, I always become that much more alive when I look at him.

A drum of need and arousal pulses behind my clit, goosebumps blanketing my skin, everywhere.

We're in a staring contest, a tornado, really. The one-year simmering, under-the-surface swirl of emotions escalates, swallowing the room, the house, the entire town we live in.

I can't breathe.

"We have to go." He storms past me, focused on his goal, which is my suitcase.

"What's this?"

The question wakes me, and I turn to him.

Raised between us is my poor, brown teddy bear.

Axel holds him by its foot, dangling my source of constant comfort as though it's a nuisance. "Is this an absolute necessity?"

I swallow, searching for the measure of pride I still have left. "It is to me."

Axel pulls his lips in, tight enough that they're gone and there's only his beard. "It's not."

When did he become a wildlife expert?

Ryker spat something about *animal whisperers*, but from what I've seen around the house, Axel hasn't gone camping more than any of us has. He works at the bar seven nights a week, broods around the house, and the rest of the time, Mom told me he spends at his friends' houses.

I'm not judging. If I'd ever be allowed to have friends myself, I'd have done that too.

Back to the present, though. My indignation simmers, recognizing slowly how he and I are practically in the same boat. Thing is, I'm really starting to get over being everyone's doormat, my savior or not.

"W—who are you to say?" For once, my annoyance overpowers my stuttering.

"Who am I?" He discards the teddy on the bed and is in my face in a flash.

Energy rolls from his body in waves, clouding the room. His short, blond hair casts shadows on either side of his face, darkening and sharpening his high cheekbones and square jaw.

He looks dangerous, and yet the thought passing through my mind has nothing to do with fear.

Let your aggressions unravel on me. Please.

I only manage to nod.

"I'm your stepbrother." Those graphite-blue eyes darken into a shade of a cold winter night as he levels them with mine.

"S—so?" The word is merely a breath.

Axel's short temper doesn't stem from my talking back to him. He's communicating to me that he's not mad. The closer he brings his face toward mine, the more assured I am of it.

The top of his cotton shirt grazes the tops of my breasts, his nose is at my left temple and then he…he sniffs me. It's hardly discernible, but I swear on my life he inhaled me in when he turned his nostrils to my skin.

"So, I'm the one in charge to make sure you come back to this dump by the end of summer in one piece." He takes a half-step back, the minimum distance required for him to meet my eyes. "I promised you out there that I'd take care of you. That's who I am. That's what I do."

He clutches his fists at his sides when I stare at him, unsatisfied. “You won’t survive by yourself, Kendall. You will do as I say, end of story. The doll is staying.”

I’ve had it. Hot or not, adult or whatever, I can’t listen to it.

“You know what, Axel? Stay here. You volunteered to this, no one’s bent your arm, and—and—” My courage fails. I march on. “I don’t need you!”

“You really fucking do.”

Before I can comprehend what he’s doing, Axel strides forward, forcing me to back up against the wall. The way he pounces at me, he cages me in as if he were a lion and I’m his prey. His lips turn in a snarl, a low hum—a growl, maybe, buzzes out of his mouth.

One hand slams the door to my room, the other bracketing the right side of my face.

Is it sick that even caged by these two tattooed arms, I feel the most free I ever have?

Aroused. That too. It scares me how sexy I find him to be, how hot it makes me to finally have his undivided attention.

These are all things that shouldn’t have happened. Nothing of what’s going on between us is conventional. Not us being stepsiblings, not my attraction to him, not Axel changing into something dark and primal.

But I can’t bring myself to care. The one truth that blazes in this room trumps everything else. I want him.

My body agrees. Dampness gathers in my virgin core. My nipples harden painfully, straining the thin fabric of my bra.

I press my palms flat to the wall behind me, my only saving grace against groping Axel’s body, anywhere I can reach. It’ll end up in an embarrassment, I’m sure of it. He won’t have his inexperienced little

stepsister touch him like I want to. Worse still, he'll toss me to the side like he did my teddy bear.

And while I won't touch him, I can't help looking at him. Painfully turned on, my eyes eat him up. They linger on the area between his thighs, to the hard, big member mounts inside his jeans. I've never seen a man's cock, but I want this one. I want to see it so bad, and I…

Axel growls.

I've been caught doing what I shouldn't.

Slowly, I trail my eyes up to his face. His tongue darts to swipe his bottom lip, his chin dipping to his chest, glaring at me.

And then he mimics my perusal of him. His eyes skim down my body, long and leisurely. Predatorial.

His nose twitches while his focus lingers on my nipples. There's no hiding my arousal. I'm not sorry about that in the slightest.

Because when he lingers on them, when his lips part to let out shallow breaths, I have hope. Maybe he's about to give in. Maybe he'll touch me.

To encourage him, I press my chest an inch forward. A girl at school did that to a guy in the hallway, and I figure it'd push Axel to do what the boy did to her—bend down and give me my first kiss.

Only Axel isn't a boy. He's a man.

"You're a pain in the ass, Kendall, but don't think I'm letting you go through this alone." He pushes from the wall, heading to my dresser by the window. "I'll die before I allow that."

He can't go through my underwear. Mortification sears me as if I'd been thrown into the fire, and I yell, "No, wait!"

The expression I'm faced with when he looks me over his shoulder is a tad exasperated, and a lot sad. "What is it?"

“It’s personal. My stuff.” When he doesn’t seem impressed, I sigh. “Give me your list of *necessities*,”—I emphasize the word he’s painfully attached to—“and I’ll pack them.”

He mulls it over for a second.

“Okay.” His decision that I’m trustworthy enough to stand by my word brings me some measure of comfort. At least he doesn’t share Ryker’s opinion about me being a moron.

Axel dictates to me how many sweaters, leggings, shirts, and even underwear I should pack. After that, he blurts out *and bathroom and women’s stuff*, thankfully saving me the embarrassment in that area. He folds my large wool blanket I sleep in while he speaks, shoving it into the duffel.

“Five minutes, Ken.” The air burns hot when he brushes past me and out the door. “We’re not staying here a second longer.”

I throw on a long, thermal charcoal shirt and a matching hoodie. Last thing I need is to have it slip my mind again and to go out to the living room topless. Fully dressed, I hustle to fold and shove in clothes, toiletries, and nylon bags.

My cell phone and portable charger are left in the room. I assume Axel would have one, and it’s not like I have any friends to call. What I have for company is my teddy, and he goes, whether Axel likes it or not.

I lean my weight on the bag, barely able to zip it when my door opens again.

“It’d be really nice if you knocked.” I zip up my bag quickly, hiding my doll.

“We’re about to have no doors between us for the next two and a half months.” A tinge of smile permeates his tone.

I whip my head back to catch the anomaly. Axel leans on my door frame, dazzling in his outdoor look with the added blue hoodie and hiking boots. The smile, however, is nowhere in sight. A figment of my wishful thinking.

“You ready?”

“Yes.”

He hikes his two loaded duffel bags over his shoulders. “Let’s go then.”

My teeth scrape my bottom lip. “I want to say goodbye to my mom.”

The imminent sorrow in Axel’s eyes strikes me straight to the heart. Through months of torture delivered by his dad, Axel hasn’t shown an ounce of pity.

He doesn’t elaborate on it, though, simply saying, “Go ahead.”

Axel clears the way for me to pass. I sling the bag over my shoulder, stepping hesitantly out to the hall. I’m treading on sheepskin boots toward the living room. The old floors creak beneath them, a vocal announcement of me being here. Mom doesn’t seem to care.

“Mom?”

She lifts her gaze to the bare minimum needed to tell me she acknowledges my existence.

I eliminate the distance between us under the Walker men’s watchful glares. Stopping in front of the wood table in the middle of the living room, I wring my fingers, uncertain of what to do with myself.

“I—we’re going. To the woods.”

She doesn’t put down the magazine. “Okay.”

“I’m going to miss you.” It’s my final attempt to get her to hug me, to show some kind of emotion other than indifference.

“Okay, Kendall.” Her eyes lower to the magazine, eviscerating my hopes to receive the embrace I’m desperate for. “Goodbye.”

Where she’s quiet, Ryker speaks. “What about a—”

“Shut your goddamn mouth.” Axel’s harsh voice slices the air, butchering the insult Ryker would’ve undoubtedly spat out.

From the corner of my eye, I gauge his accusatory arm pointing at his dad. “Not another fucking word about Kendall.”

“Touchy, touchy,” Ryker murmurs, but otherwise remains silent.

I don’t stay for him to change his mind or for my mom to not hate her own daughter. I don’t even wait for Axel to tell me we should go for the third time.

Through a waterfall of tears, I traverse the living room to the front door my stepbrother holds open for me and run down the steps to stand next to his truck.

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CHAPTER FOUR

AXEL

Somewhere along the two-hour drive through the roads of Southeast Alaska, Kendall dozed off. She hasn't even stirred when I parked the car. I shouldn't stare at her, shouldn't encourage myself to feel something I shouldn't.

I still do.

She's so beautiful, my stepsister. An angel really, especially when she sleeps.

Kendall always had this pure aura about her. Coy smiles, pink outfits, her teddy bear. Innocent. Naïve.

The perfect little prey.

The one I've been dying to pin down to the floor whenever she passed by me, to subdue and unleash every filthy desire she forced onto me.

And now, sitting here innocent and soft, sleeping against the window of my truck, I have the urge to leave my teeth marks all over her.

Her dark auburn hair pours out of her white beanie which is skewed to the side. Long, thick lashes lie on freckled, rosy cheeks from the cold. Her

big, inviting breasts rise and fall with her breaths. Pink lips are slightly parted. Begging to be kissed. To be bitten.

To bleed for me.

But I can't. Nor will I coddle her, envelop her in more layers of clothing or allow her to sleep. Truth is, even if I could, I wouldn't.

There's a two-hour walk ahead of us to a hidden path leading to a safe area to camp. I've been here numerous times over the last year to set the perfect spot for us. Once there, we'll need to start a fire, the temperatures quickly dropping below fifty-five.

We better start this journey now, make her stronger. The sooner, the better. Real life doesn't wait, doesn't show mercy. They sure haven't shown it to my mother, and she lived, loved, and breathed these lands.

"Kendall." I place my large palm over her shoulder, giving her a small shake.

Her eyelids flutter. Glacial blues emerge beneath them, slowly focusing on me. "Axel? I—what? Where are we?"

Forgive me for how I'm about to behave, Ken.

Steeling my voice, I remove my hand from her, unbuckling my seatbelt. "We're here. We need to get out and start walking."

To my surprise, she doesn't whine, her lips don't curve downward. She accepts my authority with a simple, "All right."

She rearranges her beanie, opens the door, and hops out of the cabin. I meet her at the bed of the truck, helping her unload her duffel. I allow Kendall a glimpse into my heart, to the compassion I have for her as I offer to help her slip into her duffel's straps.

"I got this." She grabs one of the straps, willful in her attempts to snatch it. My grip is relentless. "Seriously, Axel, you don't have to. I'm sorry I

acted like a…witch back at the house. I'm just grateful that you're here."

With every word she utters, my self-hatred grows. The one who should be issuing apologies here is me, not her. I should've fought Dad harder, more vehemently. Shouldn't have given a fuck whether she heard it or not.

Intimidating him to quit bullying her might've saved her from his ultimatum.

But here we are.

"Put the goddamn straps on," I grumble, unjustifiably taking out on her my annoyance with myself. I need this relentless panging at my heart to end.

She slips them on, twisting away from me while I throw mine on to watch the forest ahead of us.

I hand her a switched-on flashlight, identical to the one I'm holding. "Take this."

Silently, she complies, then follows my lead. I navigate through trees I've studied, paths I memorized by heart.

Though my visits here are normally during the mornings and afternoons, I prowled these woods a few nights too. Actually, ever since my mom passed, at least two times a month, I've taken the night off work to wander this forest. I walked them over and over until I was able to prowl them without a flashlight at all.

I'm not scared of the dark, of anything really. Except for my younger stepsister's well-being.

Sand crunches at our feet, the flapping of wings echoes above us. I glance sideways toward Kendall. The remnants of sleep dissolved off her face. Her smooth skin crinkles around the corner of her eyes as she tries to learn her surroundings, her mouth scrunched in concentration.

My dad—among many other aspects of his life—was dead wrong about her. She's not *dumber than shit and lazier than a sloth*—the asshole's words, not mine. She's clever, eager to learn, resourceful.

Even now, as we navigate through the woods and I instruct her to pick up twigs and branches to stock under her armpit while I collect larger, heavier logs for our fire, she says nothing and complies.

The only time she complained was when I hadn't given her enough credit in her room earlier. But once I assigned her a mission—she shuts up and puts herself into it.

She'll get through these forests with my help. She will.

"We're here," I announce, and we stop.

The area I had in mind for us is perfect to base camp in. It's a flat plain, surrounded by trees shaped in a circle. Kendall and I will be hidden beneath the high tops of the trees, able to spread out our gear.

Though she should learn about the terrain and the harsh conditions of the forest, it doesn't have to be a coerced torture. She shouldn't be sleeping at an angle on some rock where it was so crowded by vegetation that we couldn't light a decent fire.

Without lowering my duffels or logs to the ground, I watch Kendall as she organizes the branches on the ground and lowers her duffel, observing her movements. At any moment, I expect her to ask for anything to relieve the stress of the day: a bathroom break, for me to fix her a cot to sleep on, to take off her shoes because her feet hurt.

She does none of that. She smiles, twisting and turning to study her new home for the next two and a half months. Her innocence and the goodness of her heart are in search of hope, and in seconds, she finds it.

I understand then and there that not only I couldn’t be her—I will never deserve such a ball of optimism.

Ignoring my penetrative stare, she positions her flashlight below her chin, pointing it upward, like kids would at a campfire when telling a scary story. She tries to match her voice to it, and I wonder if she has any idea how sweet she is.

How she could never be intimidating. And how cute it is that she tries.

“It’s such a fun-creepy place.” She lowers her chin, opening her bright-blues wide. “Boo!”

My lungs constrict, and my inability to reciprocate her kindness lands a painful blow to my chest to push out the remaining air left. Sweet, little Kendall has no idea what lives in these woods. What real hell can and would’ve struck her had she been here alone.

She should be aware of it. I despise the thought of scaring her after the day she had, but she should.

“Yeah. Scary shit,” I huff, dropping the logs onto her pile, then moving back to set my bags off my shoulders.

The light’s off her face in an instant. She aims it at my neck, the clever girl, to see me without blinding me.

“Sorry, Axel.” Kendall’s teeth sink into her bottom lip. When her voice trembles, something in me dies. “I was hoping to… I don’t want it to suck for you, babysitting me.”

“Nothing to apologize for.” I squat to the floor, unclipping the top of the bag.

Kendall crouches next to me. “How do we start a fire?”

I tilt my head up, my self-loathing ascending another level.

I’m not being an asshole on purpose. I’m worried. There are too many elements to consider: bears, eagles, wolves, bugs, and that’s just nature. Setting a camp for this delicate flower, the polar opposite of me, it takes precedence over empty chitchat.

But it’s more than that. More than plain concern over standard procedures I’m used to.

It’s this goddamn, never-ending state of being turned on around her, being amped up a million times by being in the forest. Where I always turn into a hunter, where she steadily morphs into my prey.

Her doe eyes stare at me, waiting for my response. I can’t manage one coherent thought other than trapping her body beneath mine and hurting her as I fuck her for all I’m worth.

When I don’t answer, she asks another question. “Do you want me to make a bed for us?”

Another shot of arousal straight to my cock. I couldn’t carry six wool blankets to protect us from the night’s cold air, only three, meaning Ken and I will have to sleep together. What I prohibit myself while I wake, I doubt I’ll be able to control in my sleep.

My subconscious would seek friction, a way to relieve the pressure.

With my stepsister whom I followed in order to protect her, not to steal her innocence.

This uninhibited side of me is the last straw. I’m infuriated at myself

I cannot let my frustrations hurt her.

So, I shut the fuck up.

We collect dry branches in silence, and I light a fire for us. She peruses me with her curious little eyes until I’m done, then declares she’s going to brush her teeth.

She sounds…hurt.

I curse under my breath, wrapping my fingers around her wrist and swiveling her to me.

“He’s wrong, you know?” Words, explanations, they don’t come easy to me. But I coerce myself to continue the sentence for Kendall. “My dad.”

“Um… I’m not sure what you mean.”

She lies. Her downcast eyes reveal her shame, the request we don’t relive today. Or any other day. Still, I need to turn this situation around. This whole fucking year, if I’m being honest.

“The house is small. I have good hearing. And he. Is. Wrong.” The apology isn’t a true apology. It’s lame, ugly, and stupid.

That’s all I have.

Optimism simmers in me, seeing her eyes sparkling again.

“Thanks.” Her nose scrunches.

The gesture cracks through my steel heart, past the barrier I formed against touching her. I can’t stop myself, and nothing else can.

And why not?

We’re both here, alone. She wants me as badly as I want her. By the scent of hers that I’ve been picking on the entire day, her panties must be drenched.

Our desire is mutual, we’re two adults. We’re only stepsiblings, not blood-related.

It shouldn’t be wrong for me to fuck her. To mark her as mine.

I lean in for her lips. Kendall leans into mine. The air is dense and explosive the closer I get. It verges on suffocating us when my hand travels up her arm, trailing her forearm, elbow, shoulder.

She doesn’t stop me.

She wouldn’t have stopped me.

Something else does.

A branch snaps in two somewhere behind me.

A growl, then another, then a third one reverberates in the background, surrounding us.

My following motions are embedded in my DNA like the texture of my hair or the color of my skin are. I grab Kendall’s arms, pushing us both off the ground and throwing her behind me while walking backward to a wide tree trunk.

It’ll provide her with some sort of protection and peace of mind while I fight to protect her.

“Axel?” There’s a tremble to Kendall’s voice.

Sugarcoating the situation would only serve to put her in more danger. She should be aware of what’s coming. “Wolves.”

They prowl forward and into view the second I say it. Crawling out of the shadows. One, two, and a third, matching the distinct growls. I don’t see any others, but it doesn’t mean they’re by themselves.

I glare at them through slits, biding my time until the rest of the pack arrives.

Five seconds pass, and I thank whoever’s up there—probably Mom—for the lucky break. For keeping the others busy with whatever else they were doing when these three were attracted to our fire.

“Do not move,” I order Kendall, grating my teeth. The hair at the back of my neck stands on end, my fingers curl into a menacing claw. “Don’t talk, don’t cry. And whatever you do, Ken, do not run.”

Silence. I squeeze her hand once, an encouraging gesture the wolves wouldn’t notice.

Adrenaline surges straight into my bloodstream, setting me off to act. I bare my teeth, letting out a wild and menacing growl of my own to chase them off. It deters them to take a step back.

But they're still here.

I'm an alpha male, never scared of confronting those who try me. And now, knowing Kendall's safety depends on me, it turns me into an even more fearless motherfucker than I ever was.

Maintaining my threatening composure, I bend down to grab a log out of the ones Kendall and I saved for later, pouring gasoline on it. It catches fire fast, creating a menacing torch that I wave at them.

The one to my left lowers his tail and runs off. Must be the weak one of the trio.

His two other friends aren't as easily convinced.

I tilt my upper body forward, waving the burning log close to their faces, snarling and growling, spit flying from my mouth. They backpedal, too fucking slow as if they might regret it, so I straighten to my full height and stride toward them.

My tall frame is enhanced by the shadow courtesy of the fire, amplifying the effect of this last thrust of my improvised torch.

They whine in defeat, do a one-eighty, and scurry back into the woods.

"Thank you," Kendall breathes at my back.

Adrenaline is a great tool to chase off wolves, pumping you up with unimaginable strength and superhero powers. It helped save me many times in the past, helped save my Kendall too.

Thing is, there's not an on and off button. It doesn't drain out of your bloodstream as quickly as it bursts into it.

My muscles are still tense, my brain a tight, electrifying wire.

And my thick cock is very. Fucking. Hard.

The torch is useless to me. I toss it into the fire and spin to Kendall. My burning eyes clash with Kendall's relieved, grateful ones.

These unsuspecting blues could bring death on her if I wasn't careful.

In a split second she stops being my stepsister or the girl I'm in charge of protecting.

Kendall is mine to devour, my gaze eating her up first bit by bit. Her vein pumps at her throat, her tits swell, pressing and stretching her tight sweater.

Her cunt, the smell of it, it drags me to her worse than any vice.

I've never wanted anything like this in my entire life.

I'm consumed, blinded. Hungry.

I stalk toward her.

Her eyes widen at my determined approach. The faint whiff of fear seeps from her, edging me on.

"Don't thank me yet, Little Gazelle." I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand.

She gasps. My rugged knuckles scrape the tender skin, cheek to jaw. I grab her chin, turned on even more from how it quivers in my hold.

"Just because they're gone doesn't mean you're not prey, not anymore. Because you are. Just not theirs."

Her breath quickens and I bite her hanging bottom lip, releasing and grunting, "Mine."

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CHAPTER FIVE

Kendall

Mine. Prey. Two common words in the English language, ones I can read and write just fine. I can handle them in their black-and-white form.

I cannot wrap my mind around them as I face them in real life.

Because it turns out that when Axel says them, they stop being words. They're a concept, an entity. An intoxicating breath out of him into my soul, and its intensity jolts me to my core.

My thighs clench in response to the need to be possessed, a reaction Axel's eyes zap to like the hunter he's transforming into in front of me. He whips his head up again, and instead of blue there's an orange hue to his dark-as-night pupils.

Common sense tells me I'm seeing the reflection of the crackling flames.

My heart knows better, cognizant of its burning from within my stepbrother.

He's transforming into something.

It's not good, it's not bad, it's… "Axel?"

His long, lean legs stride forward, taking on the gait of a predator. I hold absolutely still, watching the three feet of distance between us turn into two, then one in the blink of an eye.

My beanie is caught in the tree trunk I'm glued to, dropping to the ground when I crane my neck up to look into Axel's coal-like eyes.

My stepbrother levels his gaze with mine, gripping my face from either side to tilt them up higher. He leans forward, his soft, blond hair brushes my cheeks, his glare swallowing me whole.

A lust I've never experienced becomes my one and only reality, my entire being.

"W—what does prey mean?"

Unlike Ryker's beliefs, I'm not stupid. I get that Axel doesn't talk about literally eating me. Nor does he act as the protective sibling, now that the wolves are gone.

He's touching me like no brother should his sister, his hot breaths that flood through his snarling mouth are not those you exhale from a jog around the park.

So, I can tell you what it *isn't*, but I'm desperate for him to lay out to me what it *is*.

"It means"—he slithers a hand behind my neck, winding my hair around his fist and tugging—"I outmatched the alpha male. Which means, Kendall,"—he sniffs the strands of my hair—"I'm the alpha male."

He presses his crotch to my thigh with force. My leggings and his jeans separate us, yet his length and erect cock are undeniable. It's there, big and scary and oh-so alluring. I whimper, incapable of connecting syllables into words.

My heart is in a tug-of-war. One side tells me it's wrong, so wrong to act on the attraction to my stepbrother, the one who lived in the adjacent room to me for a whole year.

The other pushes my hips forward to Axel's cock, to the touch I've never experienced yet I crave madly.

Axel's nostrils flare, his voice doesn't rise over a growl. "Do you know what alpha males do?"

I'd shake my head if he weren't pulling my hair. "No."

"They claim the prey of the pack." Using his free hand, Axel digs his fingers to my waist, pressing me to him while he keeps grinding on me. "And you, my Little Gazelle, are it."

A moan rushes past my lips when the length of him strokes my most sensitive spot. I flatten my hands on the tree's trunk behind me, grabbing the coarse surface as if it'd help me hold on to my resolve any better.

"We can't, Axel."

"No one's stopping us." His sharp teeth are at my neck, sinking in. Marking me.

His rugged, hot breath rushes against my skin, his member stroking over and over the place he's now aware is my weak spot. "Tell me you don't want it. Tell me to stop."

Under his hold, I'm partly delirious, partly considering he's provoking me for a reaction, wanting me to fight back.

I end up saying something that's a little of both. "We can't."

Sharp pain blinds me. Axel sucks on my throat hard, adding his teeth to the violent attack. I cry out in horror, then with unadulterated pleasure, angry when he stops to lick the wounded patch of skin.

"Kendall," he groans my name along my damp neck.

The way he says it, my name stops being the hateful scream Ryker would belt out, the name I hated for its promise to rain hell down on me.

My name spoken by Axel is nothing short of erotic.

“I see you.” Another stroke of his cock, another lap of his tongue. “I pretend not to, but I do. Have been seeing you every minute of the past year, and I know. You want me.”

The torturous sway of his hips resurrects my fantasies. His attention is my deepest desires unveiled. He kisses my jaw, nibbles my cheek.

“Your hard round nipples, your dripping wet pussy, it’s all for me.” Each word is emphasized by a fiercer thrust, his cock growing impossibly large. It’s so big and I haven’t even gotten a glimpse of its full magnitude.

“You. Want. Me. Say it.”

My stepbrother, the man of my dreams, is not wrong. The familial lines our parents ingrained in us blur and are gone. Desire claims me, but I can’t act on it before we talk about this one thing I have to tell him.

“Axel.” I struggle to remove my hair out of his grip by trying to shake my head to the side.

He’s ignoring my protests, possibly invigorated by them, as he sucks on my jaw sensually. His calloused hands release my hair eventually but only to yank down my hanging open coat.

I don’t struggle when they coast all over my torso again, allowing him to trace the curves of my belly from under my shirt, sneaking under the wires of my bra.

A fragile, tiny second separates me from complete submission. I fight for my relative sanity, for the simple truth that I have to tell him.

“Axel, hold on!” I call on some major inner strength, slapping his hand away.

Not that it helps. In fact, it invokes the opposite reaction.

My bra is yanked down, my heavy breast is freed to fall into Axel's palm. He hikes my sweatshirt and shirt up to see the nipple he rubs between two fingers.

The brutal assault on my senses makes me stop caring about whatever it is I need to tell Axel. I retire my brain, shutting off the overthinking, oblivious to anything but him.

It doesn't matter that I'm a virgin anyway, does it? That my lips—other than Axel's quick bite—were never truly kissed? It doesn't. It shouldn't. I can handle the pain of having my virginity ripped from me, to pretend it's nothing while Axel's cock impales me to the tree.

I can do it.

I want to do it. And I surrender to him. My relieved sigh is the white flag he needs to go ahead. And that's when he freezes his motions, his insatiable eyes narrowing at me.

"Do it." I furrow my brow, fighting to breathe. "Touch me, Axel. T-take me."

He's a good listener. A very good listener.

He holds my breast up to his eager mouth; his hips roll to dry-hump me slowly. His beard-framed lips zero in on my upturned nipple, parting to suck in my wide, round areola. All of it.

Both of us hum and growl at the contact. His tongue laps hungrily at my nipple, both moans getting louder until they're almost screams in our throats.

"Axel, don't—oh my God—don't stop." I clasp my hand on his nape to urge him to keep doing that wicked sorcery on me.

Axel’s knee jerks between my legs, pushing them apart forcefully while his palm slides to cover my lips.

“You’re forgetting your place, my precious little prey. I’ll go when I want to, stop when *I* say I will.” Danger, the sensual kind, flashes behind his eyes. “Lucky you, I’m in the mood for the former. A whole fucking night of it.”

I drop my hands to the side, surrendering—really surrendering. He ravishes my untouched breast, lavishing equal attention on it, molding my breast with his sinful palm. His teeth chafe the aroused flesh, tongue flicking on the sensitized tip. I bend to him, to whatever he dictates.

My body is his.

My eyes must emanate the fear and longing he awakens in me. There’s a pleased glint to his eyes, even though his face is barren of a smile. He talks to me without words, and I nod in understanding.

After this fragment of a connection we achieved, Axel’s hand travels south down my body. Goose bumps prickle along the trail of his fingers, my mouth breathing out moans I don’t recognize as my own; not just loud, but throaty, not soft, but squeezing my lungs in the process.

But then he crosses the threshold beneath the waistband of my leggings; his palm presses right beneath my black cotton underwear.

Maybe I’m not as ready as I thought.

I freeze, paralyzed. My muscles wound into one intricate knot, my fingers digging into my fisted palm, eyes snap shut.

Axel, who hasn’t responded to my earlier pleas, responds now. My state of shock brings him to an abrupt halt. My sweatshirt falls into place, my skin bereft of Axel’s heat.

I open my eyes, scared he’s left. He hasn’t, standing three feet from me.

He stares at me in complete confusion, hands on his hips. “Something’s wrong, isn’t it?”

“I got carried away. The adrenaline.” His hands clench and unclench, as though he wants to reach for me but doesn’t allow himself to do anything at all. “I’m sorry, Kendall. I won’t do it anymore.”

My terror of having my virginity taken withers. The wounded boy in front of me reminds me it wasn’t some stranger touching me, that I craved his touch for a year, desperate for it. That I still do.

“Axel…”

“There’s no excuse for what I’ve done.” His eyebrows lower on his forehead, his head turning from me. A painful picture of torment. “I’m just really fucking sorry for not stopping the first time you told me to.”

“I don’t need your apology. Look at me.” He does. Layers of sorrow manifest as creases on his otherwise smooth brow. “You did nothing wrong. Don’t go, please.”

Some of his self-recrimination gives way to befuddlement, a look I’ve yet to encounter in Axel’s eyes.

I suck in a long calming breath, enabling myself to be weak alongside a man who allows himself to be, too. “I want you. Have wanted you since the moment I carried my duffel bag into your home.”

Nothing.

The second sentence I just spit out, because fuck it. “I’ve never been kissed. I’m a virgin.”

The wood snaps as the fire eats at it. A wolf howls in the distance. It’s not registering, though, not really. My ears are attuned solely to Axel, to him and the rejection I sense coming with each second of the growing silence.

But once more in the past twenty-four hours, Axel does the unexpected.

He prowls forward, cups my jaw in his two, sturdy hands.

And he kisses me.

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CHAPTER SIX

AXEL

"Fuck, Kendall." I groan against her wanting mouth.

Then a clear thought spears my mind.

It surpasses the high of the adrenaline rush Kendall wouldn't let me come down from. It trumps over how good her body feels against my cock as I thrust it on her. It knocks over the growing hunger as I suck on her lips.

I'm her first kiss. I will be her first everything. I will mark this ethereal, virgin pussy first.

And I'll be the last.

The girl who just turned eighteen at the end of last year, whom I watched walk to school every morning while I hid in the shadow of my curtain, shouldn't be the one I craved to possess.

For fuck's sake, my dad introduced her as my new sister at that lame dinner when he announced he was marrying Claire.

I don't care anymore.

My defenses and the numerous reasons why it's wrong crash one by one.

I can't turn off the need for her. Now more than ever. She's a girl, *my* girl, who'll soon become *my* woman. Having my dick slide past her virgin pussy,

it consumes me whole.

The human inside of me diminishes nearly into ashes. Fortunately for Kendall, a glimmer of him remains. A voice reminding me tearing into her unprepared will be too savage, even for someone like me.

I get down on my knees. Her yoga pants and underwear go down with me. My eyes widen to roam her body, nostrils flaring to smell her. Loud drums pound behind my ears as my pulse hammers so hard it could blind me.

For months I've lived off the scent of Kendall's pussy. Got painful, hours-long erections from it. Finished myself off more times than I can count, inhaling the panties I stole from her dirty laundry.

But to look at it, at the soft, barely-there auburn hair, how the lips barely hide her thrumming, needy little clit. War wages inside me, knowing how bad I want to eat her out while fearing the first taste will awaken the beast in me to devour her without a fraction of care or compassion.

"Axel?" Her siren voice calls to me.

"Tell me something." My fingers, unbidden, dig into her hips. I inch closer, my knees scraping the ground. "Are you scared of me, Little Gazelle?"

She opens her lips, her pink tongue brushing the lower one. "No."

"You should be." I skim my thumbs up and down her bare skin. "Does my prey have any idea what I'm about to do to her?"

"No." Her throat bobs with her swallow. "What?"

"I'm going to kiss you down there."

My right hand coasts to her center, running two fingers from the bottom of her clit to her hood once. My tongue runs up the same trail.

It’s a feather-light stroke, nothing nearly enough to satisfy my need for her, but Kendall feels it. Shivers rack her body; her erotic moan rattles my entire existence.

“And I won’t be this gentle again. Ever.” It’s my final warning.

Then my mouth devours her pussy whole. I suck her clit between my teeth, parting her folds for better access for my tongue. Kendall’s hands rake through my hair, gripping fistfuls of my hair, her throaty cries repeat my name when she’s not crying for God.

I feel you, baby, I think. *Right there with you*.

Her swollen nub is both soft and hard and fucking delicious, and I want to taste more. Letting my fingers flick and circle her center, I kiss lower toward her opening where her scent is the most concentrated. Where I’m dying to be.

It’s even better than I’d dreamed of, better than I could ever hope for. Arousal dampens her inner thigh, her cunt a pool of need.

My teeth scrape her lips once, before I dive into the wet spot, sucking and drinking her in. Her pliant body trembles, falling into me. I cast my eyes up to encounter her gaze begging me for more, telling me not to stop.

There’s a thrill to the hunt. The challenge in the chase, the high I get from it, it’s enough to have my cock hard no matter where I am.

Until the capture stage comes along. Of my prey lying beneath me, compliant, sedated. Conforming to her fate.

Kendall looks at me through her innocent gaze and pleads with me for more, bringing the both of us to that precise place. That sweet spot where rivers slope into waterfalls and submission is the divine and not a plain act of surrender.

Christ, how I ache for her.

But I can’t let it end so soon. Now that I’m there, I need to see her fall so she can rise again.

My upper lip curves into a snarl, and I growl these domineering, harsh words, “You’re not scared enough.”

Sliding a hand behind her leg, I scrape her flesh as I drag my hand from her thigh to her calf. Kendall whimpers, lips quivering. Afraid of me, again.

Where I want her.

Almost.

“Hands back on the tree. Hold still,” I roar as I hike her leg up my shoulder.

She complies, allowing me to manhandle her.

“You’re mine, Ken.” My head tilts, teeth digging into the soft skin of her thigh and she yelps. “You’re eternally mine. Your body is mine, your pussy is mine. Tonight, I’ll claim both. Are we clear?”

“Yes,” she peeps.

The docile reply satisfies me. I pull her folds open, plunging my tongue into her slit, mercilessly fucking her pussy with it. Her cries of pleasure echo in my ears, her juices coating my lips, trailing down my beard.

There’s no finesse to my ministrations. My fingers rub her clit and hurt her as much as they bring her pleasure. My mouth is in a constant chase to swallow every single drop, lick every surface.

Her panting slows, and I can’t have that. I pinch my lips like I’m about to kiss her, sucking another mouthful of my baby’s juices. Nothing ever tasted as sweet. Nothing ever will.

To the sound of her moans, I dig my nails into her thigh, bruising her. She needs a constant reminder that I’m not gentle. I’m a beast. That’s what she’ll get, and I’m starting to sense that’s what she likes.

Out of the entire universe, the pot to my primal kettle had to be my stepsister.

And she's about to come. The scent of her pussy intensifies, the delicious fragrance growing more concentrated.

Fuck if that doesn't make me that. Much. Hungrier.

An animalistic growl pierces through me; my hand reaches up to her tits. My lips are on Kendall's clit again, my fingernails scraping and branding her breasts, digging into them. Her prickled skin breaks as I drag my hand down to her nipple, lacerating her, branding her.

Mine.

Her thighs clench around me, her body's weight leaning fully on me. Complete submission. It's my moment to take the final claim before I fuck her, to witness her expression change when I make her come.

Another thought flashes in my head. *When I make her happy. She needs to be happy.*

On my knees, I crawl forward until they touch the wood trunk, and my body sits between her thighs. I want to be there and feel every-fucking-thing when she orgasms.

This orgasm is mine.

Kendall. Is. Mine.

I can't allow her to overthink this, or my virgin stepsister will panic. I slap her large, beautiful breast right on the nipple I scratched to get her attention.

A slew of "fucks" and "Axels" are ripped out of her. To a girl who hardly ever speaks, the curse is a goddamn symphony.

A mating call.

The cry of her blaring orgasm, her pussy sopping with the juices she drips for me.

Reveling in the slowing waves of her orgasm will have to wait for another day, though. I stand up, kissing her O-shaped, shell-shocked mouth.

“Hands up.” The command is said in silence, but might as well have been a scream in the silence of the forest.

She listens to me, my good girl. I yank her clothes up her body, snapping the front of her bra open to relieve her of it, to have her bare and ready to be all mine when I finally make her mine.

“How did I—” she starts.

My hand snaps to her mouth, shutting her up. “No insecurities. Not with me. You’re perfect.”

I scoop her in my arms, laying her on the dirty ground. I’ve slept on grassy and sandy grounds so many times, but just by having her here, it’s different. Better.

Kendall’s hair splays around her in a sunshine aura, lighting up my world. In an out-of-character gesture, I bend down to kiss her forehead, linger that extra second to marvel at her glimmering eyes.

Then return to business. I kneel to yank off her boots and pants, towering over her once I’m done. She’s ripe and gorgeous. Young and an old soul alike. And mine.

“Have you seen a naked man before?” My voice is as gravely as the floor she lies on.

Hesitation causes her to pause. “No.”

“Not even online?” I ask, hoping the answer is no. I’m desperate to believe I’ll be the only one for her.

She doesn’t hesitate and fucking hell what a relief when I hear her say, “No.”

“You’ll be seeing mine right now, my sweet Little Gazelle.” I take one long look at her before tugging off my sweatshirt and shirt, kicking my boots and socks off. “Going to see my cock, how hard I am for you, then you’re going to feel it deep inside you.”

The button of my jeans pops open, my fly dragged down. My throbbing dick pushes forward, straining in my boxer briefs. I shove them to my feet, revealing myself to her, gauging her reaction.

Kendall is panting. Her breaths are strangled, her hand rubbing her belly, edging lower. She’s dying to be touched down there again.

I catch her wrist. “One glimpse at my cock and you’re already greedy for it, aren’t you, Ken?”

“Y-yes.”

“Good.” I drop to all fours. Kendall traces my every move, takes in my every word. “Because it’s the only one you’ll see, the only one that’ll fuck your three holes, from now until forever.”

I spread her legs to the sides, holding them pinned to the ground. Advancing toward her, I sniff and lick her skin. Thighs, pussy, navel, breasts, committing her to memory. The blunt crown of my cock plunges into her entrance, widening the tight virgin hole.

“For the longest time, I couldn’t have you. Didn’t allow myself to even look at you for too long.”

I slide my cock in deeper, withholding myself from ripping her virginity away before I decide it’s time. “Thought I could protect you from a distance. But I’ve always been so fucking starved for a taste of you. To have all of you.”

“You have?”

Her insecurity torments me. Knowing my actions, my avoidance planted it there slashes my soul. I press my forehead to hers, scraping my fingers on the delicate line of her jaw, securing her chin between my fingers. She wobbles, breaking my heart, waking the possessive beast in me.

“I have, Kendall. Wanted to be everything for you. I settled for protecting you however I could, without tearing down the walls and asking you to be mine.” I pull out of her, pushing back inside with a little extra force, just until I feel the thin layer of her virginity wall blocking me. “I can’t stop myself anymore, though. Don’t tell me to stop.”

Her mouth opens, and I fill in for what I assume would be her next question. “I’ve always used a condom.”

“And now?”

“Never going to wear one with you.” I nuzzle her nose, biting the tip of it.

“Why?” she mumbles when I roll my hips, stretching her a tiny bit more.

Easiest question, hands down. I’m halfway surprised that the answer isn’t clear to her. “I’m not letting go of you. This beautiful belly *will* carry our children.”

“Please,” she begs.

I don’t know what she’s asking of me. I’m too fucking wired to question her.

What’s important is her consent. And how she squirms in pain as I open her up.

“My Little Gazelle, how I love the smell of your fear of me and only me.” I sniff her neck, sucking and licking it. “Yes, it’ll hurt like hell. But I’ll fuck you so good, it won’t be long before you’re begging for it again.”

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Kendall

My head bobs, dry leaves crunching beneath my hair as I do.

He's going to take my virginity, which I wanted to give to no one but him.

His big, veiny cock sinks all the way into my pussy, tearing me in one brutal stroke. An immeasurable, searing pain becomes my reality as he does. The pressure in my most private of areas tears me in half as he shoves himself in me again, and this time he stops.

We're glued to each other, so close his pubic bone is glued to my belly.

The swift penetration, the tear of my virginity, and the predatorial look in his eyes should be enough to make me want to crawl into myself and hide. To revert into the scared little girl I've always been.

Except they don't.

I'm aching, existing in a situation way out of my comfort zone.

But I still want this. I. Want. Him.

Even though he's not merciful in the slightest, even does as he promised, being anything but gentle. There's no pause to his thrusting, to the pull of his hips just to slam into me for the third time. He steals my breath away.

Takes my heart with it, too.

He glowers at me, eyebrows pulled together. His bottom lip is scrunched under the weight of his teeth, biting it hard.

“Kendall,” he grunts, though no words follow it, leaving me lost to myself.

Little rocks scrape and indent my back, sand gathering at the places where my naked body sweats. Axel is ramming his cock into me repeatedly. He takes and he takes, and I continue to give and give it to him.

He’s harsh, not cruel. Lavishes me with love, not punishing me.

I’m not being coddled or being treated with indifference.

I’m being claimed. Taken.

With him, my lone wolf, minutes of anguish, of coping with the new sensation, they pass and are gone. The pain dissolves into nothing, leaving room for pleasure in its purest form.

Yet I know it’s not everything he can give me. I’m not certain what else lies behind those famished eyes, and being an inexperienced virgin, I can’t put a name to it. But I’m eager to find out. To reach the sweet pain that connects us again.

“Axel.” I raise my hands to cup his face.

Sometimes, in life, a simple gesture is all it takes to get your message across.

Axel’s reaction is immediate. He lifts one hand off the ground, gripping my arms and maneuvers them to be crossed and pinned to his chest with one of his arms.

The relentless, furious thrusting continues while he wraps his long, powerful fingers around my wrists, fixing them together into a bind.

My gasp and flinch at his crass movements don’t hinder him. Axel pushes my arms up and over my head, thrusting my wrists to the ground. He’s bent on top of me, his cock sinking somehow deeper.

An intense sensation of tearing flushes through my center the second time. It doesn’t hurt like before, but it’s there nonetheless. My cry is followed by a tear, the salty liquid running down my temple, sliding along my ear and into my messy hair.

“No.” Axel’s growl pulsates from his chest straight to my soul. “You belong to me, Little Gazelle. And you’ll never cry again unless I tell you to.”

He ignores what must be a myriad of questions in my eyes, taking care of me in his own special way instead. He licks my tear away. The flat of his tongue wipes my distress clean. He narrows his gaze at me, blue eyes concerned and inquisitive.

“I’m fine.”

He nods once and resumes fucking me. His lips find my bouncing breasts, sucking a nipple in. The unhinged sounds blurring from my mouth encourage him, his tongue licking the tip of the nipple he’s biting and pulling up.

Giving my other nipple the same attention, same primitive slurping, Axel is getting me closer and closer to a second climax. I’m coasting above the *almost there* stage, again and again and again. Just as I think I’ve made it, that I might come, something drags me back.

My frustration builds, mounting into a pillar my arousal keeps smashing into.

What should I do? It’s my first time, so I have no idea how I can communicate with him. If I even should.

Would talking ruin it? It probably would. Ryker said my talking always ruined everything.

So, I act on my needs, instead of specifying them. I arch my back to touch Axel and our flesh slaps when he fucks me now, my chest to his, my clit to his hard, taut stomach.

For half of a blessed thrust, it lands me my goal—the hairs above Axel's cock chafe on my clit, and once more I'm a hairbreadth from having an orgasm ravage my body.

That swift second, though, that's all I get. Axel's handsome face snaps up from my neck where he sucked on my skin. The tattooed arm to my side is gone and punishing; damaging fingers sink to my waist, hoisting my torso off the ground.

His teeth are back at my neck, biting as if he's trying to draw blood. The furious retribution to my acting out isn't a product of anger, that much I know. Even a virgin like me can tell that when a man's dick swells within you, it can only point to one thing.

He likes it. He wants me. I'm floating up to the heavens from the knowledge.

Axel's talking in the midst of applying pressure on my hands, with his mouth at my neck and his cock thrashing into my body. "You keep forgetting *you* are mine to toy with. That you should bend to my will. Not take."

Stars gather behind my eyes when Axel finds a new angle. I'm where bliss lies and nothing hurts anymore.

I wish I could've been compliant. But my body is a Pandora's box Axel opened, and it wants what it wants. The muscles at my core are coiled and

needy, and I float higher, my thighs squeezing uncontrollably closer together.

An all-consuming, life-changing orgasm wrecks me; a bold, bright light illuminates the darkness, and I'm almost blinded by it. I'm forever changed, forever his.

"My good girl, that's it. Milk my cock." Axel's balls smack against my ass, his sweat mixing with mine. "Gonna empty my cum inside your womb, my Little Gazelle."

"Yes," I mumble through the immense pool of emotions.

His hand moves from its death grip on my waist to slam on the ground next to me, and a burst of hot load shoots into me. Axel's chest heaves as the growls slow; his teeth unclamp slowly from my throat.

He remains there, nuzzling instead of raging, his growling giving way to a soft hum of pleasure. "My Kendall. My little Kendall."

Unsure of what to say, how to react, not even confident enough to trust my own thoughts, I stay silent. Axel's head turns so his lips are at my cheek, his tongue slipping out.

Only when he starts licking my face in idle, caring laps do I notice a new wave of tears pouring down my cheeks.

Axel says nothing as he dotes on me. And I couldn't be more content.

Words would be an empty shell, useless to describe what we've done. How I feel.

I have no use for talking now.

But just because we don't talk, doesn't mean he doesn't care. His body speaks, his mouth soothes me. He's everything I need. Using his lips, he lavishes kisses on my neck, chest, each breast, and then my navel.

His hands run through my hair, my arms, following the curves of my hips.

Axel grows soft inside me, pulling out of me the lower his sweet caresses go. Fluid runs out of my crevice, and his eyes are drawn to where I'm open and bare.

My dull reflexes kick into action, snapping my knees together.

I'm no longer drowning under the sated haze, the result of what Axel and I have done.

I'm mortified. Dying of embarrassment from having blood trickle, staining my thighs.

"Don't." His hands are on my knees.

The gentleness in his touch, the slow deliberate parting of my thighs, it's extremely tender. It comforts me. But not entirely. I'm still this raw mesh of emotions. My tears are a monsoon rain, a curtain of mist down my face.

"It's okay." Axel kisses each of my knees; his eyes are oceans of compassion. "You haven't been loved for a long while, Ken. It's a lot to take in. That you are now."

I sniffle, blinking in affirmation. That's all I can do, really.

He ceases stroking me lovingly and lies on his stomach. From there, he places his hands on either side of my thighs, revealing me to him.

His mouth is a mere breath from my center; his shallow breath flutters on my damp skin. On my clotting blood. My shame returns, knees edging closer together.

"Please, don't." Axel blocks my second attempt to hide myself. "Let me show you love, let me teach you how to accept it."

Our eyes connect in a moment that can be hours or minutes or even weeks. There's sincerity in his, a *Trust me* look I can't ignore.

I pull my lips in, giving him my permission. “Okay.”

A coy smile curls up his mouth before he descends to my bare thighs. “Now let’s get you cleaned up.”

His tongue drags on the outside of my folds, where my blood and his sperm mingle. He’s the epitome of softness, the prince of devotion. Axel licks me from outside in, a darling animal tending to its wounded mate.

Under his attentive care, I unravel again, coming in a quiet gasp. My tears have stopped, my heart slowing with them. I watch him slithering up my body, accepting him, handling me into a spooning position.

Axel drapes the wool blanket over our huddled bodies, protecting me, caring for me.

The last thought trickling into my mind as I slowly fall asleep is that Axel was right. I really didn’t need my teddy bear here.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

AXEL

Twelve months of living under one, cursed roof.

The first two months of it, I hated her.

Sixty-one days to realize she's done nothing wrong.

Stupid.

Then came ten months of sniffing, tracking, shielding her to the best of my ability.

A little over three hundred days of being constantly aroused by her. Pining for her. Jerking off to her just because her shampoo would permeate through the air vents while imagining my teeth denting her sweet, curvy ass as I spank the other cheek red.

Kendall's impact on me back home has been enormous, though not obsolete. It's not like I lost track of the vow I made to myself after Mom was declared deceased—to learn to survive anything and anyone.

I have, however, grown softer around the razor-sharp edges during endless minutes and seconds of infinite need and emotions. Developed desires and have become painfully protective of her.

She's done it to me, despite my best efforts to push her away.

But after yesterday, I'll never push her away again. Ever.

Because yesterday she became mine. Our skins brushed, our bodies connected. Tears she's been guarding inside flowed for my eyes alone. Happy, cathartic tears.

I freed her. Through our brutal lovemaking, I showed her what I couldn't otherwise express. That I would be her strong person, that she can finally be weak.

Ryker would have spun her submission, used it against her.

I… I will forever put her on a pedestal for her bravery to be that woman. This Little Gazelle, this precious prey. The girl who's all mine.

It's morning now, but since we ditched our phones at home, I have nothing to indicate the time. An educated guess considering the sun in the sky and the shadow the trees make signify that it's around noon.

My stomach has been gurgling for the past two hours. I gazed at Kendall, and noon is as good a time as any to wake her up. It'll be criminal, though, to stir her out of her sleep.

And maybe I am a criminal for taking my stepsister's virginity. For grinding my dick into her ass as she slept, for fondling her breasts.

Whatever it is, I can't stop it. Can't stop adoring her.

"Kendall." I tuck away an auburn lock obscuring her profile. Tear-crusted strands of hair remind me I still need to bathe her, with real water, not just my saliva and lips. "Kendall, baby, wake up."

Her nose scrunches. Excitement ghosts under my skin at the prospect of her waking up.

"Axel?" Those long lashes flutter on her freckled cheeks, bright blue eyes slowly focusing on mine.

A rustling of her hair is all I give her. It isn't enough to erase her confusion, considering her new circumstances. I'd have been on the constant lookout for answers myself.

"Everything alright?"

She remembers where we are. Surprisingly, she's okay with it.

I'm in awe, flustered into silence. On my first morning in the wilderness, it took me long minutes to remember where I was and why I was there. The clever woman beneath me remembers it in an instant.

I might have been staring longer than I should, because now Kendall isn't just frowning with concern, she's in full-blown panic mode.

Her natural blush is drowned out by a pale white. Her pulse jackhammers to a thousand a minute, breath slowing to almost a halt. I stroke her wrist, trying to appease whatever causes the storm in her.

"Do you need your teddy?" I start, suddenly considering it a necessity greater than food. "I'll make a quick drive into town, get you a—"

"W-were the wolves back? While I slept?" Her mouth trembles, her question mumbled.

Fuck. I should've realized she'd think of that before anything else.

What's a minor inconvenience for me is a big fucking deal for her. Mom had taken me to the woods plenty since I was a kid. Some of the wolves were friendly, some you simply had to chase away, while the others didn't bother to acknowledge you.

I'm used to them. I'm also used to being alone. And that's how tapping into her pain had bypassed me.

Fuck.

I kiss her temple, rubbing her arm. "No wolves, not today."

She collapses into my embrace immediately. "Okay. Okay. Good."

“We have other visitors, though.” It’s not a hardship to widen my smile in her presence. The honesty in it comforts her.

“Where?” I have to distance myself when her head spins in a million directions, gauging the ground.

I grab her chin, angling her head to gaze up to the skies. The sun might be hidden by the treetops; the bald eagles, though, a little less.

“Oh my… Oh my god, Axel. They’re beautiful,” she says in awe, talking to me yet unable to detach her eyes from them. “Best. Morning. Ever.”

My lips gravitate to her nose, kissing it. I’ve never been a touchy-feely man, with humans that is. Her, though? The way she doesn’t detest nature or call me a freak?

I’m at her goddamn feet.

“Where are they going?”

Yeah, and the fact she turns to me for advice and that freaking adoration. She’ll have me in pieces by the end of the day.

I force the words to come out. “They’re heading down the stream. Their food’s there. Salmon.”

She jumps up to sit, oblivious to her stark nakedness. “I want to go see. Can we? Please?”

My gaze gravitates to her breasts. The late mornings of Alaska’s summer are significantly hotter, but seventy degrees is still chilly. The pink, round nipples stand upright, pointing at me.

Kendall’s dainty fingers tug on the blanket, awareness calling on an unnecessary sense of modesty. I adore her, every bit of her.

Covering her palm, I wrench down the blanket. What I see then, when her body is exposed down to her navel, it fills me with light. The marks I

left on her, where my nails scraped and my teeth broke through her pale skin, imprinting me on her.

I trace a finger along the bruised area, following the purple hues with the pad of my thumb. Kendall's breath hitches.

"Does it hurt?"

"No." Her lips twitch. She suppresses a smile, cognizant that this isn't what most people in the outside world would deem *normal*. "I think I like it."

Fuck normal.

Normal is what brought me to this place. Normal is the biggest abomination of them all.

"It's okay." I glide my palm to the bottom of her breast. Round and heavy and fucking perfect in my grasp, I lift it to my lips.

"Really?"

"Yeah, really." My smirk evaporates as my mouth makes contact with the first purple mark on her breast. Shivers rake up and down her body. I gaze up to find she's studying me, part awe, part desire.

"In fact, Little Gazelle,"—I swipe my tongue in a circle, tasting everywhere I've rendered as mine—"there's nothing wrong about surrendering to someone who'd never abuse this gift. Of you."

She's silent for a beat. I kiss her some more, devoted to the other breast, to the other marks.

However, giving in to me doesn't abolish her doubts altogether. "Even if we're…"

The rest of the question is self-explanatory.

I don't want to discuss it this morning.

There are eagles to observe, a bath to take. She should be happy. Talking about our familiar proximity and all the reasons we shouldn't be together wouldn't bring us any closer to having her smile.

It's redundant at best. Especially since it won't make me love her any less. Won't make her any less mine.

"I say we spend the afternoon by the stream." I scour for my boxers, pulling them up to cover myself, then collect Kendall's old clothes from yesterday. "Fight the eagles for some salmon."

"That'd be awesome!" Her enthusiasm echoes between the woods, bouncing into my heart.

Pride filters into my heart at being able to console her. Protecting her is what I'm here for.

"Good. Here, take these." I hand her the clothes I picked up to wear until we reach the river to wash them, then her, and put on the new ones.

Kendall dresses, while I head for her duffel to get her fresh clothes and her toothbrush. A smile eases up my face at seeing her teddy on top of the clothes. I place it carefully to the side, selecting her clean outfit for her.

There's silence behind me. Then a meek, "Don't be mad about the teddy, please."

"I only ever wanted you to be safe." I look at her over my shoulder. "I don't care that you have it. I care for you having your necessities to survive. But everything fit eventually, so…"

"Yeah," she says despondently.

"Yeah." I shrug, resuming to choose her clothes. I won't apologize for wanting her safe. I'm upset at myself for barking at her, sure. Still refuse to apologize.

The outfit I pick consists of my favorite color on her. Pink shirt, pink underwear, and a clean pair of beige wool yoga leggings. Her expression is not here nor there when I pass the stack over to her.

Her stuffed animal glares at me all the while. With good reason. What's wrong with me? Why do I have to be a dick when I've already mentioned how crucial her survival is to me? I made my point about what bothered me with her teddy bear. I have to move on.

Shaking my head, I murmur, "I love that teddy."

"Liar." The blossom on her cheeks shakes me stronger than a storm ever would.

The ruddy complexion on her cheeks tells me she's okay. That it's fixable.

Crouching to the ground beside her, I ruffle her hair. "Am not."

"Are too." Her disagreement weakens as my fingers massage her scalp.

She leans in to my touch, a low purr humming from her lips. I kneel, coming closer, and she swivels her head, nesting her soft cheek into my rugged palm.

Inviting me to play.

With one swift movement, I toss her clothes to the ground, pin her to the ground and loom over her. The scents of the wood, trees, and wildlife blend into the wonderful scent of Kendall. The sunlight accentuates the field of golden freckles glittering on her cheeks and nose.

This girl is everything. She's been through so much, yet she still giggles when I tickle her, smiles when I nuzzle her nose to mine. I'm awed by her. So much so that sex doesn't top the list of my cravings.

Just her.

As I gaze at her innocent face, at her blind trust, I'm softened, changed. I promise myself that when I fuck her brains out again, it'll be different. I'll shield her from my eagerness, take it slow.

Next time, I'll be her comfort, a field of poppies instead of a thorn bush. Then she might feel protected, would agree to move out of our parents' house and be with me.

She'll be young and free again. Even though she's my gazelle, she also makes for the sweetest little cub to play with.

I bracket her between my arms, descending to my forearms to frame her face with my hands.

"Beautiful." I bite her bottom lip, tugging it a little, releasing it with a pop.

"Are you still lying?" Humor is abundant in her frown.

"I never do." Allowing myself one last sniff of her neck, I hop to standing. I extend my hand to her, my other one hugging Kendall's waist the second she's on her feet.

"Never?" She breathes hard, pressed into me.

"Never." My hair swings as I shake my head. "I promised you we're going to see more of those eagles, catch salmon, and wash our clothes, and as I'm a man of my word…" I complete the sentence by jerking my head in the direction we're supposed to go.

Disappointment ebbs and flows behind her eyes. I want to tell her I love her, that this too is a form of care. But I'm not great at talking, at explaining deep sentiments. I'll probably end up hurting her more.

I've done that plenty. Enough for a lifetime.

Conforming once more to the way I express myself best, I kiss her cheek, take her hand, and lead her to our fun day.

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CHAPTER NINE

Kendall

"You see, this is how you scrub your clothes on the rocks." Axel slants his gaze at me, my now-clean shirt in his hands. A smile I haven't fully gotten used to lights his serious face. "Go ahead, give it a try."

He's taken me to a river, his fingers laced with mine the entire walk, until we got to this magical place. The sound of the water clashing, the greenery surrounds us. That and how Axel and I are butt naked in the water after he helped me shower and wash my hair.

Did I say magical already? It is. Incredibly so.

I pick up the soap bar he passed me, holding his boxers in the other hand. I don't even start when the wildest thing happens before my eyes. One of the salmon hopping upstream gets captured by a bald eagle's talon. One minute there, the next—gone.

"Axel, look! Holy shit!" I sit high on my knees, craning my neck to follow their flight, feeling his eyes on them too.

We've been here for about ten minutes, and though Axel hasn't given me any reason not to believe him, I've been getting skeptical. For no reason whatsoever, apparently.

“They disappeared fast. Did you catch it?” My shock registers in my voice as I sit back down on my heels.

The soap bar and my underwear remain in my hands, though they’re more or less forgotten as I cast my gaze to my stepbrother.

Axel forgot about them as well. He inspects me with growing interest.

And a growing cock.

God created both Axel and his member to perfection. It’s the absolute truth, doesn’t matter that I have none to compare him to. Something tells me, a solid sense of intuition, that I could’ve seen a thousand. It won’t change how I think his is the most gorgeous one, period.

My stepbrother is the first boy—man I’ve been attracted to, the only one to rule over my fantasies. There’ll be no one else.

“Little Gazelle.”

My gaze rises to his face. Axel’s expression mirrors mine—lustful, awake. In need.

Heat flutters low in my belly, flowing like magma, condemning me to melt.

I breathe deeply, inhaling the fresh scent of the soap and the river and the woods. Their calming scent would’ve been helpful, if not for Axel’s unnerving and decadent sensual silence.

The running currents clash on the rocks. We’re sitting at the river’s edge, so droplets of water sporadically spray on our skin. My breasts, heavy with desire, feel every single one of them land on my body.

Their effect and Axel’s searing gaze blend into an arousing concoction my nipples are helpless to fight against. The two pink buttons harden, press forward and up, betraying my need for Axel.

“Kendall.” Axel sucks his bottom lip in, revealing a set of teeth that match the bite marks on my breasts.

My eyes blink in rapid succession. My legs squeeze, trying in vain to control this attraction. I refuse to be the one asking for it, hitting on him. If there’s one boy tip I picked up from eavesdropping a random hall conversation at school, it’s *Don’t be desperate; never chase a man*.

For Axel, on top of being a turn-off, it would mean stealing his role. I like our roles. I love him calling me his Little Gazelle.

I’ve waited for him for a year. I can wait a while longer. I sit there, looking at him while he’s staring back.

“The… What I showed you…” He shakes his head, jaw clenching.

He’s not making any attempts to hide his erection, so I know his anger isn’t aimed at me. Is he mad at himself? For yesterday? He had fun last night. I sure had. It was consensual. No way he regrets it.

Could it have been my question about us being stepsiblings, then? I made a mistake bringing it up. What we have is out of the norm, it’s taboo, but in no way do I plan on ending it. He shouldn’t be mad. Shouldn’t restrain our mutual desire and affection.

Axel sees through my confusion, reaches to my hair and tugs on it lightly. He’s playing with me, but not fucking me. He warms and breaks my heart in tandem.

“Give me here.” He slides his palm to my fingers, prying his boxers out of my hold, then moves to retrieve the soap. “You’ve had a rough year, Ken. I’ll do it for both of us.”

A week ago, such an exhibition of gentleness from Axel would’ve been enough. The pinnacle of my wants and needs. But yesterday happened, and now this feels like he’s putting a wall between us, not drawing us closer.

I sigh inwardly, barricading my insecurities out of his sight.

“I got it.” I fake an enthusiastic tone, snag the boxers out of his grasp, bend to the river, and start scrubbing.

Axel’s sweetness lingers throughout the day and into the night. We fall asleep cuddled, my back to his chest, his teeth nibbling the hollow area connecting my neck and shoulder.

“Sweet dreams, Little Gazelle,” he murmurs.

His voice sinks into my skin when I wish his teeth would. Our needing bodies are separated by our cotton underwear when I wish not a stitch of air would be between us.

I’m being bratty and ungrateful. He didn’t have to be here. He could’ve stayed at home. I could’ve been here by myself, my body torn to pieces by wolves within the first twenty-four hours.

I know.

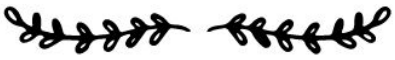
I know.

I.

Know.

At least, I tell myself that I do.

With a dismayed expression that I hide from him, I snuggle closer, taking whatever he’s offering. “Night, Axel.”



The morning after, I stop being the sweet Kendall and lose my fucking chill.

My dirty fantasies haunted my dreams, ruining my sleep. I drifted in and out of sleep with images of his teeth marking my shoulder and his cock marking my pussy and my ass. Repeatedly.

These snippets were what ruined my night and why I'm awake drenched in sweat with a throbbing pussy. I lust for him, for my savage man-wolf.

My years without sexual experience come back to haunt me, my sex-crazed mind wants Axel and it wants him *now*.

I'm aching, needy, on the precipice of desperate for him to take me like he did when he tore through my virginity.

I wish he'd flip me and position me on all fours, ravage me from behind—in any hole, I don't care—while he has his hand wrapped around my hair to pull me hard until I scream.

And it's not just sex for the sake of reaching a climax. I want to feel the things he showed me before when he fucked me—that even when I'm not as powerful as he is, I'm not helpless. More than that—that I'm never alone, that I won't ever be from this day forward.

It hurts how bad I'm craving it. Aching for him.

And it hurts that Axel doesn't seem to want it at all.

"Morning, Ken." He pats my head in that sweet way you would a friend.

He's lying on his side, studying me when I don't lean into his touch like I have during our time here. His kind eyes question without words why I'm sitting up instead of falling into his embrace.

Don't beg for what he doesn't want to give, Kendall. Don't be the pathetic little girl Ryker said you were.

"Hi." I force a smile.

He sees right through me, the corners of his eyes wrinkling. "What happened?"

“Nothing.”

Axel pushes himself off the blanket we slept on, his large palms immediately cupping my cheeks. He mirrors my position by sitting on his knees, parting mine to settle between them, and leans into my face.

Concern seeps into his features as he studies me harder. He brings his nose to my shoulder, neck, cheeks. His nose hunts for something I can’t imagine is a tangible smell.

Eventually, and unsurprisingly, he finds it, picking up on my disappointment.

“Kendall.”

His hand tousles my hair; his cheek grazes mine in a back-and-forth motion. He hums me a song, “Lay, Lady, Lay” by Bob Dylan that I heard him sing at home once after a really awful screaming session Ryker gave me.

I considered it a coincidence back then, him humming in his room. I understand today that was his secret way of comforting me.

He’s being the sweetest ever. Shut up with your complaining. It’s just sex, you don’t need it. Worse still, you don’t need to be angry about it.

The words make sense, and I wish it was a switch I could flip on and off. Because, as I mentioned, I know.

Then again, I really don’t. Not anymore.

“No,” I huff, scowling, though he can’t see me.

Axel moves to look at me. “No?”

“No.”

He looks me over, face, neck, and body. My lack of bra has me feeling exposed and vulnerable under his attention, my arms folding over my chest to obtain a shred of privacy.

The stepbrother who has observed me in secret for a full year knows all my mannerisms, about my tics and tells. It won't take him long to unravel the layers of my desperation.

When he finds out I'm this pathetic girl who needs him to have sex with me so bad, he'll lose interest in a heartbeat. Game over. My only solution is to hide myself, hide my emotions, lock everything down and wait for *him* to approach *me*.

He reaches for me, the familiar, loving hand hovering over my face.

I turn away from him.

"Kendall, quit it." A roar laces into his voice, a glimmer of two nights ago. Of my predator.

An idea comes to me. Maybe I don't have to ask. Maybe I could just… act.

I give it another try, scooting back. Dirt and gravel scrape my knees and legs and feet, and I don't care. How, and most importantly, why should I pay any attention to anything other than the low, threatening growl Axel makes?

Three or four feet separate us. A distance I have to take in order to gain his attention. Axel—wearing a black pair of boxer briefs and nothing else—drops his hands to the ground. His short hair drapes on either side of his menacing face, framing his growing light-brown beard.

He fascinates me. That rawness, the energy force whirring around him. The tenacious hunger I observe in his snarl and the red flickering in his dark eyes. Turning my head once more is impossible.

Remaining frozen and letting him do as he wishes isn't a possibility either. I refuse to let this be a repeat of last time, of satisfying a need just to have him return to be noble again tomorrow.

Axel marked me with his teeth, came deep inside me, and imprinted his stamp on me, claiming me as his.

It's only fair I'll tattoo myself on him too.

If I put up a fight now, be brave, he'll never again dare to view me as the fragile, abused Kendall I've been made out to be due to my stepfather. I'm determined to make it so the next time Axel Walker thinks of me, it'll be the girl who chose to be his prey.

His Little Gazelle who wants to be trapped and played with.

He takes a step closer.

He's almost on me, the shift of his shoulder blades announcing he's going to pounce.

Being his good prey, I spring to my feet.

And I run.

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CHAPTER TEN

AXEL

The bottoms of my feet are protected by a thick layer of coarse skin from years of running with Mom or by myself on the earth's rough terrain. They're not impenetrable, but pretty fucking close.

They make stones, twigs, and thorns hardly register in my chase of my Little Gazelle.

The second she flinched earlier, when she started our game, my adrenaline shot through the roof. When she jumped up, round butt cheeks peeking underneath the pink underwear I chose for her, the words *taking it slow* lost their meaning altogether.

See, there's no coddling your prey. There's only hunting it.

And I do. As I sprint through the woods, my predatory instincts claim my human side, turning my muscles into well-oiled machines programmed to pounce. I breathe, smell, and see the tiniest detail in the forest as they guide me to her.

Kendall runs ahead of me; her long, dark auburn locks dangle at her back. She got a minute or two on me, those I allowed her to elongate the

chase. Though it doesn't look like I had to. She's a good runner, a clever one at that.

Instead of continuing straight ahead, she does her best to confuse me, gripping a tree trunk and swinging her body to the right to change the path she's on. The fired-up neurons in my brain take a second to realize where our new route leads, allowing Kendall another meager advantage.

But it's not meant to last. No matter how fast she runs, how many detours she takes, she's no match for me. She probably likes it this way, knowing I'll always find her.

I know I thrive on it.

I bend my knees, launch, and envelop her in my arms. "Gotcha."

"No!" she yelps, kicking her feet in the air.

The fiercer her fight, the tighter my lock on her middle becomes. My hard cock presses into her behind, getting harder by her struggle.

"You're fighting me, Little Gazelle?" I whisper, my lips brushing the hair covering her ear. "Want to make me work hard for you?"

"Let me go!" she keeps yelling, her fingers trying helplessly to pry my hands off her. "You don't want me like that."

I freeze. How can she say that when my erection is fucking painful, agonizing? I have to prove to her I want her. I press her harder to me, grinding myself between her butt cheeks, my teeth sinking into the T-shirt covering her shoulder area.

"We both know that's not the truth. And I'll never fucking let you go." I untangle one hand from her torso, forcing it inside her underwear. "You are mine, Ken. *Mine*."

Her fight doesn't waver, head thrashing, nails scratching. She doesn't stop even when I shove three fingers in one push inside her pussy. I drive

them into her, harsh, methodical strokes that must hurt her no-longer virgin pussy.

My previous considerations for her sensitive skin vanish into thin air. She'll have me, she'll writhe for me, and she'll come violently from *my* touch, pain or no pain.

As expected, Kendall's battle cries morph into cries of pleasure. Her resilient mind keeps her body kicking, and I insert a leg between her delectable thighs to get the advantage on her and glue her in place.

Pushing my foot to the right, I tackle her to the ground, rolling on top of her and plastering my chest to her back.

Small feet of other animals tap somewhere next to us, getting farther away from the source of the loud thump we made. Other than that, it's just her and me and our labored breaths and shuffling bodies. She won't quit her escape attempts and I would *never* quit on her.

There's a moan of agony when I remove my hand from her pussy. A more visceral one when I free her torso to pin her face to the ground with her profile to me.

"My poor little prey, thinking I don't want her."

I tug her panties down to her knees, scratching her ass cheeks, marking her in five red stripes. Looking down, at the red tracks of my nails crossing the light lacerations the rough terrain left on her, I'm momentarily stumped. Struggling to breathe.

The beautiful blend of my two favorite kinds of marks—mine and nature's—spins me into a state of hypnosis. Of becoming a downright, primal animal myself.

I whip my cock out, stroking it, growing harder at the sight of it next to Kendall's bare butt. It's an unconscious act, the tugging. A necessity, really.

I’m in that much need, where all I can think of is satisfying it, and her.

In fact, I’m so consumed by it that I miss what’s going on beneath me.

Kendall surprises me and flips on her back in a quick, swift motion. Applying the technique I used to get her to the ground, she wedges a foot between my legs, and a second later, I’m on my back with her on top of me.

Should’ve realized her change from a fighter into a docile little girl had been too abrupt.

I growl when her hands pin both of my arms to the ground, preventing my attempts to reclaim control and flip her over. Her breasts stroke my chest as she grinds herself onto me; the taut nipples heighten my desire to attack her, to bite them until she bleeds.

I flash my teeth, crossing my ankles around her waist to try and overpower her. The blue in her eyes turn a million shades lighter, almost transparent.

“Don’t tell me with words, Axel.” She leans more of her weight on me, raising the challenge. “Don’t even fucking tell me with hugs. *Show me* you want me. Tear into me, make me yours.”

Trapped under Kendall, the tenacious soul who needs her proof as badly as I’m aching to control her, I devise a plan.

“Come here.” I point my chin up to signal her where I want her.

“I won’t.” She puts an effort to keep her butt in the air, resisting the pressure of my ankles yanking her down.

So fucking clever.

Resorting to plan B, I swivel my head to the side, catching her arm between my teeth. The surprise bite coaxes a gasp out of her, weakening her strength for a moment.

Which is all I needed. I free my arms and clasp my fingers around her throat, my heels digging into her ass one final time before her body gives in to me. Her chest molds to my chest; my cock finds its place flush against her pussy.

She's wet, soaking, hot with desire. Her pheromone scent drifts up to me and I can practically taste her on my tongue.

"Not. Fair," she grunts. But her eyes tell me defeat isn't the emotion she's experiencing. It's a relief.

"Don't give a shit." The pulsing head of my cock flicks on her clit as I grind beneath her. "You're mine, and I won't play fair to get you. Every fucking time, Ken."

Her brow furrows, a sensual sigh slipping between full, pink lips with each stroke.

"Aren't you"—she moans, squeezing her hips—"aren't you going to top me?"

"No." I fist thick strands of her hair in my palm, drawing her head down to plant a harsh, bruising kiss on her lips. "Remember what you asked me to do?"

Her pouty lips awaken the hunger in me, eradicating any semblance of patience I might have had left. When I pull her face to me again, I sink my teeth into her pouting bottom lip. Her wide eyes are horrified and expectant all at once.

While still biting her hard, I whisper, "You asked me to show you."

Her cunt is sopping, making penetration easy with a mere change in the angle of my hips. My name on her lips is either a cry for help or that of pleasure, I don't know, and don't care.

"I'll show you, my Little Gazelle, just what a prize you are to me."

In the locked position I have Kendall in, she's immobile, trapped. I thrust my hips up, pummeling hard into her. Her contorted expression is art at its finest. Wanting to see her pain intensifying, I sink deeper into the helpless woman in my arms, lowering her head to mine until our foreheads press to one another.

"You're so fucking wet, Ken," I groan.

Her hot, welcoming walls tighten around me, her swollen nub rubbing on my stomach.

"I've been desperate to have you like this. You know that, Ken, don't you?"

"No," she growls.

"I have. You always smelled of sex." I drag blunt fingernails down her back, claiming every part of her. "And you taste like goddamn paradise. I'll never want anyone else. Nothing this world has to offer compares to you."

The rough voice and words push Kendall to come, and she clamps on my cock before shivers rake her body. Her tender lips seek mine for a kiss, which I allow her. But only one.

"Up." I release her out of the human trap I've built.

Stunned eyes and parted lips fill my vision. Love her fucking lips. "Where?"

"Here, baby." Aiding her after the orgasm she experienced, I hoist her up to sit on my chest. I slip a hand into her swollen folds, coat my fingers in her arousal, then pull out.

"Taste yourself." This isn't a request.

It's more of a heads-up.

I dip the fingers behind her teeth, stroking them along her tongue. She purses her lips around me, slurping on her own juices.

“That’s it,” I groan, pushing farther to the back of her throat. “Now you know what I love, what both of us will taste when you’ll suck my cock.”

Realization slowly dawns on her. Trepidation isn’t far behind.

“I’m starved, my beautiful, innocent Little Gazelle.” My knuckles stroke her cheek. “Fucking famished. Turn around and let me have you while you take me all the way down your throat.”

The command in my tone leaves no room for arguing. She turns around, and my eyes feed on her shivers, on the mild fear running beneath her skin.

I might be lying beneath her, but I control her in every which way.

One of her legs passes above my head to straddle me. Until she situates herself, I bite and suck on her calf, my blood pulsing to my cock at her soft squirm.

She’s finally on all fours on top, her mouth facing my dick. Clear juices make her pussy lips glisten, trickling down her inner thigh like honey.

Mine.

“Axel?” My hips jerk as her tender palm cups my shaft. “How do I… How do I do this?”

She couldn’t have been more tempting if she tried, my innocent little stepsister.

“You part your lips wide in an O shape, like this.” It’s unnecessary to explain what an O shape should look like, but I still do. I part mine, stamping them on the calf I haven’t tortured, then pull back to ask her, “Got it?”

“M-hmm.” Her thighs clench, her scent intensifying.

Knowing the idea of sucking me off heightens her arousal gets me off, and a drop of precum dampens the crown of my cock. “You see what you’re doing to me?”

“Me?”

“Yeah.” I lick her leg, thrusting my hips higher. “Told you, there’s no one else.”

“Did you…finish?” she asks in awe.

“No.” My fingers dig into her ass, forcing her to my lips. Saliva pools in my mouth, hunger and lust, and the ache to conquer drives me half mad. “It’s my body telling you I’m impatient to have you swallowing my cock.”

“Oh.” A hot puff of air lands on my aching member.

In a brutal movement, I draw her cunt with my tongue, sucking on her clit. She’s frozen, her head not going where I need her the most right now.

I come up for air, spanking her ass, leaving a blunt red mark of five fingers right on top of my scratches.

“Do it.” Fucking her with my fingers, I continue my commands. “Put me in your mouth, spit on me, taste every inch that’s so goddamn hungry for your mouth.”

She pauses, then she does it. A visceral growl bursts from me, the unexpected pleasure a stab to my heart.

To receive her affection, pillowy lips, and the gentlest little tongue on my cock—I’m doubting whether I even deserve it. I pray to fuck I do because I’m incapable of pulling the brakes on us, nor will I ever.

The animal runs wild, dire, demanding a release.

“Take it, Little Gazelle,” I command her. “Take all of me.”

I encourage her with my words and actions. I take a long drag of my tongue, clit to slit to the edge of her pucker. The light touch does it for her, relaxing her jaw so she’s deep-throating me until I hit the back of her throat.

“Fuck, Kendall. You suck me so fucking good.”

Wetting my thumb in her glistening entrance, I massage the tight ring of nerves. My lips and teeth exchange between her clit and her slit as I swipe my tongue on her, suck, nibble, drinking her in.

Her teeth graze my cock, her hand cupping my ball sac. It's her first time, but it's like she knows what gets me off better than I do. I've been with random one-night stands before Kendall moved into our house, the girl I hardly recognized since she was so sheltered and hidden by her mom.

Not one of them was Kendall. The emotional connection, how she molds instantly into my lifestyle. She's my whole world.

I plunge my thumb a tad deeper, pushing open the muscles around the rim. My kinky woman loves it, screaming and moaning on my cock as she comes on my hand and mouth.

"Up!" I bark in contrast to how weak I am on the inside. A second later and I would've come inside her mouth.

She obeys, and I toss her to the ground on her back, yanking her shirt up her torso. My fingers curl around her neck, lifting her head off the floor, while my other hand tugs on my thick cock, leveling it to her sweet face.

"Gonna come all over your face, Ken. Your whole body will know you're mine." I pull down her bottom lip, opening her mouth to have her taste whatever lands there. "Close your eyes, baby."

Her obedience is immediate. So is my orgasm.

"Jesus." Hot, furious shots of cum spurt to where I aim my cock—her face, her hair, her chest.

Long moments pass before air filters back into my lungs. When it does, I admire my little one. So goddamn beautiful in white.

She licks her lips, my hungry girl. "I love your taste, Axel."

And I love you.

“I wish you could’ve seen what I’m looking at.” I stroke her chest, spreading my cum on her breasts. “So fucking beautiful.”

“Thank you.” Her chuckle lightens the atmosphere. “I’m so happy, Axel.”

I bend to brush my lips to hers. “So am I, Little Gazelle. So am I.”

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kendall

"I'm having second thoughts about cleaning this off you."

Axel carried me in his arms to the river to wash our clothes of the dirt and sweat and sex. He nestled me to his chest, his gait ever confident, humming "Lay, Lady, Lay" on our path there. He was out of his broody element, becoming the Axel I'm getting acquainted with during our time here.

I love both.

Hell's bells, I love *him*.

It's not the sex. It happened long before he looked at me with adoring eyes, while he was still closed off back at home. All the reciprocated affection has done was to make it clear he loves me back. But as for me, I already knew.

I'm a hundred levels higher than happy when he holds me this way when I'm painted in his orgasm. He sits us both down on the river's edge, or so the shallow water tells me, since I can't see a thing with his cum gluing my lashes shut.

Droplets of water sprinkle at my feet, caressing the ends of my hair. My face and breasts are sticky and a mess and it’s the most cherished I’ve felt in forever.

“I don’t want it off me either.” I flick a finger on my nipple, scooping the small bit of Axel on it and sucking it in my mouth.

His low growl warns me to quit it, but with his cock hardening beneath me, why should I?

“Wicked Little Gazelle.” Axel’s torso leans forward, though I have no idea what he’s doing.

Doesn’t take long for me to feel it. Cold water hits my face as he splashes them on me, a rough chuckle serenading my ears. His unadulterated joy affects me, making the abrupt attack sweet and funny. I yelp and giggle, burying myself deeper into his chest.

The rumble welcoming me sends a rush of excitement fluttering down my spine, and I smile, letting him take care of me. His caring ministrations as he wipes himself off me, one soft caress at a time, melt my heart in places I didn’t realize it’d been frozen.

“You’re good.” He kisses my forehead.

I’m quick to tilt my head up, to have our lips mesh together. There’s comfort in it. Excitement too. An exciting comfort.

“I already miss you.” He purrs into my hair, massaging my arm up and down.

“Miss me?” My smile tears at the corners of my lips. “I’m here.”

“Yeah, but I wish I could live like this, hugging you twenty-four seven.” His head rises so his kind, warm eyes are gazing at me. “I have to catch dinner, though. We should head back to camp before it gets dark. And you, my little, you need to dry up.”

“I can help. With the fish.” My stomach hums at the concept of food, while my heart booms at the idea I won’t be useless. I studied his movements the other day. I’m positive I can at least try. “We could catch them together.”

His lips tilt to the side. “Next time, okay?”

The old feeling of inadequacy weighs heavy on me, a sinking feeling that catches me off guard. Enveloped by disappointment, my shoulders slump; my chin sinks into my chest.

Axel shifts my head to meet his gaze. “It’s not what you think. You’ve been through too much, you just can’t comprehend it yet. Let me take care of you until you’re used to the forest. To me.”

He’s working on being an empath, and I appreciate it, doing my best to reciprocate. If looking after me makes him feel better, I’ll grant him his wish. Today.

“Okay.”

His smiles come more naturally each time. He nibbles on the tip of my nose, sending me into a second round of giggles.

He helps me to the ground where I can dry up, walking his naked body into the river. “I’ll be right back.”

From where he left me, with my chin resting on my knees, I admire Axel. His bare back, his muscles straining as he lifts the makeshift stake he sharpened with a rock then strikes the water, coming back with a fish.

The short blond hair on his head glimmers in the afternoon’s sun, the corners of his eyes crinkling as he twists to me with two pink salmon caught for us to eat.

I was never big on consuming animals. We’re growing too many of them, beyond what us as humanity will ever need, ending up disposing of

numerous lives whose ending had no purpose.

But it's not like that with Axel. The sweetheart he is, he's catching the precise number for us to consume, knowing how to filet them so nothing goes to waste.

He's kinda my sexy hero.

We walk back to camp, fingers laced, arms brushing from the closeness. As soon as we get there, Axel encourages me to change into dry clothes.

I'm more than willing to oblige, especially since he's the one who chooses them for me—a pink long-sleeved shirt and cream-colored wool pants.

"I'm going to pick us mushrooms." He's already halfway gone.

"Axel, wait." I wobble on one leg, working on getting my foot into my pants. "Can I join you?"

"You're still tired, Ken." He walks to me, lowering to his knees to help me put my clothes on. "Let me spoil you. I promise I won't be long."

I can't say I agree with him, or that I'll be this compliant forever, but he's right. I am exhausted. And maybe a little sore.

"Okay."

His lips brush my forehead, and he's gone. Long minutes later, Axel's back, throwing a white T-shirt and faded jeans on himself. He quickly cooks dinner, serving me an iron plate identical to his. My mouth waters at the grilled salmon and the mushrooms he collected, my stomach rumbling from the lack of food since yesterday evening.

"Thank you." I kiss his cheek, devouring the delicious meal. Between bites, I tell him, "It's better than home. How come you never cooked for us?"

The sun has started to set, casting shadows across the forest. I can still gauge Axel's expression, illuminated by the fire he's set up earlier, and I'm saddened by how it crumples.

"I failed you in more ways than one as a stepbrother."

The double entendre isn't lost on me. My chest concaves into itself, words struggling to come out. "Because of what we're doing?"

His eyebrows knead together, palms gripping my cheeks. The storm on his face then disappears when he drowns my lips in his kiss.

"Hell no," he grunts, forehead pressed to mine. "Being with you is a blessing. The only regret I have about us is that I wish I would've come on to you sooner."

I slide my cheek to graze his, both of us comforted by mutual caress. "Then what is it, Axel?"

He pulls away, self-deprecation tainting his handsome features. "I kept my distance, I've been rude—"

"Stop, please." I shake my head, wrapping his hands in mine. "It's in the past, it doesn't matter."

"It does to me." His posture stiffens, his thumbs stroking my palms. "I've been scared. Bad things happen to people I love. Just look at my mom."

A sharp knife stabs at my heart, leaving it to bleed. It's been a little over a year since she passed away at their home. He must've seen her body. What a deep-seated wound must fester in him after witnessing something that morbid.

"You can't blame yourself for what happened to her." Tears prickle in the corners of my eyes, my voice faltering. "Cancer is a horrible, horrible illness and—"

"What?" Any semblance of the vulnerable Axel disappears.

“Your mom.” I tilt my head, confused. “Mom said cancer took her, that the drugs aided her in passing to heaven at home and not at the cold hospital.”

“That’s what she said?” His teeth grit. Hard.

I swallow around the lump in my throat. “Yes.”

“Motherfucker.” He gets up, pointing a finger at me. “Stay here. Please. I need…” He rakes his hand through his hair, pulling at the strands, fully exposing his tortured face. “I need a minute. Please don’t go anywhere. Don’t follow me.”

I lost my dad at a young age. I have no idea what true grief feels like, the coping mechanisms, the knowledge to tell him what he should or shouldn’t do. And Axel is in his element in this forest. I refuse to judge him for doing what he feels would make him better.

“Sure. I’ll be here.”

By the count of three, he’s gone.

At ten, a lingering, wounded howl reverberates through the trees, burning to ashes the last pieces of my soul.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

Kendall

My eyes are sore; streaks of dried tears run down my cheeks. I'm not experiencing something as shallow as sadness for Axel anymore. I hurt his hurt, torn by his pain, even though he hasn't told me what it is that tortures him this bad.

Not that it matters. The *why* has little importance when the *who*, my big, sturdy wolf, is in agony. It cuts me to my core just the same.

Minutes turned to hours; darkness fell on the woods like a black-and-blue blanket.

And I can't stay put anymore. I've held back for as long as I could, given him whatever space he's asked of me. I did as I was told, fulfilling my promise, despite being driven half mad in the process.

There's no sound of his footsteps, no echo of Axel's voice, pained or otherwise.

A terrifying notion claws at my throat, cutting off my air supply. What if something happened to him? He fought off the wolves the other day, but he had his makeshift torch. Or he could've stumbled somewhere, sprained his ankle, or broke his leg.

He could be calling for help. All alone.

I’m hyperventilating, my mouth’s dry.

The old Kendall, the one Mom treated like a prisoner and Ryker called a fool, that girl would’ve stayed in place. She’d be scared of her own shadow, wouldn’t have believed she had it in her to battle whatever lies out there. She would’ve knitted her sorrows away, contained in her sad little existence.

This new and improved Kendall has a mountain of faith in herself. She has a heart full of love for Axel, and self-pity isn’t a part of her repertoire.

Not anymore.

Furiously, I wipe the tears off my face, putting my socks and boots on. My blood runs hot with the sense of intent that I don’t even consider a sweater or coat. I’m focused on Axel and nothing else.

Grabbing a flashlight, I start jogging in the direction Axel took off. Noises and sounds of living creatures chirp and hum and buzz around me. I sidestep a porcupine walking in my path, feeling a tree trunk brushing at my hips.

The beam of my flashlight illuminates my path. Green grass, brown trees, a hint of mushrooms.

No sign of Axel.

I’ve gone far off camp, veering left and right in my search for him. I wouldn’t be able to find my way back tonight alone, I’m aware of that. Doubt if I could make it out tomorrow in broad daylight, either. I need Axel for his sake and now, that of my own.

Hope runs low, and though keeping my mouth shut was the best course of action to begin with, my situation has changed. Drastically. I have to say something.

“Axel?” I whisper, sneaking glances left and right for any other animal that might answer my call.

Nothing. The bushes don’t ruffle, ominous steps don’t come.

“Axel?” I raise my voice a notch. When there’s still a big bunch of nothing around me, I swing the flashlight in circles, up to the treetops and back to the ground, yelling, “Axel! Where are you?”

A large palm clamps on my mouth; the other one tosses my flashlight to the ground.

I scream my lungs out into the hand.

“Shh…” Rugged breaths tumble down my neck, the familiar scent of Axel wafting to my nose. “What have I told you, Little Gazelle?” His voice is gravelly, absolutely primal.

A cry of relief bursts forth and I sink into his chest. A wave of fresh tears streams down my cheeks, sliding to Axel’s palm.

He’s okay.

“You disobeyed me,” he growls, ignoring my distress.

His sharp teeth graze my neck, and he’s snaking an arm around my stomach, fingers digging into my skin through my shirt.

“You’re not wearing your sweater.” Axel pulls me closer, teeth denting my flesh. “Tell me, little one, are you trying to die on purpose? Trying to take away the one precious thing I have in this whole fucked-up life?”

His words, despite the angry deliverance of them, are those of fierce love. Inside my chest my heart pounds, knowing my all-consuming, primal longings are reciprocated. He and I connected on many planes to the point that we’re unbreakable.

And I need to heal what’s hurting my other half. Now.

I shake my head, latching on to his hand and prying it off my mouth. It drops to the side, while Axel's breathing slows.

"What happened?" My question is about nothing and everything.

"No," he answers. "You shouldn't listen to this."

Slowly, I turn to face him. His arm trails from my stomach to my back, pressing me to him until our chests collide.

I caress his thick beard, clenching my fingers on it to match his ferocity. "Tell me."

"No."

"Tell. Me."

His eyes flash in anger, and so many other emotions. Too many. "He killed her."

My gasp is a silent one, my horror ever-present.

"Ryker killed her. He had enough of her love for nature, the trips she'd taken me on, of how we always returned dirty, muddy, and so fucking happy. He couldn't stand the sight of her crystals, of her talking about the moon or how she petted the spiders. He loved her beauty. Hated the rest."

My mouth dries up, my brain working on accepting the new information. "How?"

Axel tilts my head up, caging my face in two, large and dirt-ridden palms. "My brilliant gazelle, why did he send you here?"

To toughen up, learn to be useful. It stands on the tip of my tongue. Axel sees it, and his eyes tell me this isn't the truth. "He wanted me dead?"

"Correct." His face skews, smooth brow wrinkling in torment. "He sent Mom out here during the winter, told her he'd accept her love of the wild if she'd truly prove she was one with it and could survive under any weather

conditions. If she could do that for a month, he'd have her back, never say a word again. To neither her nor me."

Axel's fingers sink in, the memories fueling his fury. "A week after last year's massive storm, he went to collect her corpse, paid a doctor to declare it as cancer. Explained it by saying he didn't want everyone to know his wife was a *freak*. He never mentioned he was the one who sent her out there to die."

"We moved in a couple of months after that storm," I mumble. My mom couldn't have participated in this. I can't fathom the thought.

"And I hated you for it. Both of you. I thought you knew. That you were in on it." Axel's lips crush into mine, a wordless declaration of how this isn't the situation now.

I want to cry, but I'm too choked up to form any response.

"Two months later, my grief morphed into rage. I had my mind made up to go to the police." He nuzzles my nose, voice choked. "Then, on the afternoon I planned to drive to the sheriff's office, Ryker called you to the living room."

I remember that day. The first time he yelled at me for leaving my pink yarn on the couch and told me what a stupid hobby knitting is.

Axel's touch is tender as he strokes my cheek. "I was adamant to protect you. But I was so broken myself, I didn't believe I could take care of you if I sent both our parents to jail. So I tried getting through to him whenever you weren't around, to have him stop talking to you like he talked to Mom."

"Axel, I'm so sorry—"

"Stop it, Kendall." There's a warning in his tone.

He can stick it. I'll be there for him however I goddamn please. "I'm so sorry he put you and your mom through this—"

“No!” he roars, clamping my mouth shut again. “Don’t pity me. Don’t pity my mom. Don’t pity yourself.”

There’s no penetrating the fortress of his justified anger. Not by talking.

As always with Axel, I’d have to do it with actions.

Cutting a limb would’ve been less of a torment than turning my back on him. I wrench myself out of his hold, taking three steps toward God knows where, until…

I’m being stopped abruptly. Axel’s fingers curl around my throat, his rock-hard cock pressed to my back. The whoosh of a knife popping out of a sheath cuts through the air.

It doesn’t scare me.

In the most depraved sort of way that I can’t understand myself, it turns me on.

“You know I love it when you run.” The front of my shirt is sliced right down the middle. “And how I love catching you even more.”

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AXEL

This little girl, the one I kept ignoring for a whole year, gets me more than anyone ever has.

She sees through my fit of rage and misery and instantly figures out what would snap me out of it, how to lure me back to her.

“I do,” she breathes. “I know.”

My hand tightens on her throat. That doesn’t stop Kendall from rasping words that are bound to ruin me. “You’ll always be there. And I’ll always be there for you. Always.”

When she told me before that she believed my mom had cancer, it was a moment of sheer relief as well as a suffocating torment. She really had no clue, had been lied to like the rest of the town.

But talking about it was what brought on the suffocating feeling that never truly went away. I relived it, my mom’s murder, and it was too much. I had to run, to drown out my emotions. And I had, until she found me.

I love her adorable face and presence. And yet, it does nothing to snuff out the fury that overtook the human side of me.

“I hope you’re not attached to those pants.” The switchblade I always carry in my jeans becomes very fucking handy in stripping Kendall of them.

I slip a hand down to the waistband of her pants, gripping both her underwear and them, cutting them down to her cunt.

Sweet scents of her arousal spiral in the space around us. I don’t have to look at her tits—though I fucking do—to know the skin around her nipples is as tight as her clit. I move away from her, repeating the same motion on the back of Kendall’s pants.

“Boots and socks off.”

She kicks them somewhere in front of her. The low beam from the flashlight hardly illuminates us. With the immaculate night vision I inherited from my mother, this sliver of light is plenty for me.

I’m staying behind my stepsister, admiring her back after I discard her shirt, the cuts and bruises I administered on her. Satisfied, I kneel to dispose of the shreds of her pants, perusing more red marks from when I claimed her, how they paint her soft, pale skin.

I can’t get enough of it, of marking her, of branding her as mine.

Energy doesn’t vanish into thin air. It shifts and morphs and transforms from one thing to another. My wrath, in this case, has taken the shape of a violent need to claim another hole of Kendall’s body. To fuck her in her tight little ass, make her mine *everywhere*.

My hands coast up her thighs, outside of her hips, back to her thrumming center.

“You make me so hungry, so desperate to have you.” I part her ass cheeks, setting my nose at the top where her butt connects to her lower back.

She whimpers when I dart my tongue out, swiping it along her exposed strip. A faint scent of fear carries to me along with her heightened arousal, making my dick strain against the zipper of my jeans.

I open my lips, sucking on where I licked her, diving lower. “I’m starving for you. All day, Kendall. I want to eat you out.”

“Axel, but—”

“Quiet.”

Her reservations die on her tongue the second I wrap my arm around her and pinch her clit between my fingers. From there I dip them into her drenched pussy, dampening them, returning to stroking and pinching her throbbing bud.

While I’m pleasuring her clit, I use one hand to keep her crack open to me. “Christ, you’re beautiful,” I murmur, before framing her pucker with my lips.

Kendall’s dainty fingers become bestial, reaching back to me. One grips my hair, the other my neck for support. Her knees buckle, her body trembling when I press my tongue on her tight hole.

Even living in the wild, Kendall’s body and openings are clean. Everywhere. I drag my tongue across her crack in long, slow strokes, alternating between the delicate outline of her crack and nudging myself inside her briefly, and out again.

She loses herself in the sensations, and I’m feeling thoroughly unhinged. Her hips thrust forward to my hand working her pussy, then she leans back to push into my mouth. She wants everything, and it gives me monstrous pleasure to be the one who causes her to be like this.

Having her going wild drives my roars to be more bestial, my moans uninhibited, evoking sounds of a wounded animal. Which I am. My heart is

broken, though it’s slowly repairing itself by being the purest form of who I really am around Kendall.

Her cries of ecstasy overlap mine when she orgasms from my unforgiving touch. I gather her in my arms, lowering her to the ground. She’s casting her large, bright blue eyes at me, glazed and sated, her body limp and submissive to my touch.

I manhandle her, turning her to lie on her stomach, hefting her upper body up and arranging her forearms close to her. My regal sphynx.

“Do not move,” I warn. Standing up, I get naked, discarding all of my clothes.

There’s one article, though, that I haven’t parted with. My switchblade.

“You’ve been such a good little prey.” I kick her legs from either side, putting them together then kneeling to straddle her. My cock nestles between her buttocks where it’s wet and warm.

I rock back and forth on top of her, gripping her waist. “Given me so much of yourself. I’m grateful.”

“Oh,” she moans, her head dropping.

“But I won’t be satisfied until I’m filling each and every one of your holes.”

Her eyes dart back to the knife I’m holding. She doesn’t flinch. “I’m yours. Take me however you want.”

“What if I want your blood?”

“Will I die?”

“No. I keep it clean.” I run the edge of the knife on her upper back. “The cuts will be shallow, but blood will be drawn. I’ll taste you while fucking your ass. Own you.”

For a second, I think I see a bright, serpent-like orange flash in her eyes. Or maybe it's just my imagination because of the things she does to me, what she wakes within me.

Kendall drapes her hair to one side, allowing me more access to the skin I scraped. "Then do it. Axel, I'm yours to do anything you can dream of. I can take it."

"You're everything." I groan, bending to kiss her deviant lips. I bite her hard, rewarded by her cry. "I love you, Kendall."

The heartfelt declaration doesn't stump her. Nor does it take her longer than a millisecond to answer, "I love you, Axel."

My eyes flare, my heart's a racing cheetah. I bite her cheek, bringing the knife to her throat.

"Talking time is over."

A short smirk tugs at her lips, even though the blade lies flat against her life source.

She trusts me, a sentiment I'm working to be worthy of. At the same time, however, I need to see her react to this as if I would hurt her, as if I could turn the blade and have her thick, Kendall blood run down my hand, staining the brown dirt on the ground.

I press the knife tighter to her throat and bite into her earlobe simultaneously. Her muscles stiffen beneath me, her eyes seeking mine for answers.

"I told you you're mine, Ken," I growl, sliding the knife up and down her throat.

In her face there's horror and passion, fear and need. One trumps the other in the end. I feel it in the smallest movement of Kendall's ass, her feeble attempts to get friction on her wanting clit.

“My knife’s turning you on, my little slut?” I breathe in her ear, swiping the blade up and down her throat carefully.

She’s stunning with the sharp stainless steel knife pressed to her tender skin. I’m so fucking hot for her, thrusting my cock into the space between her butt cheeks, and the two of us move as one unit now.

“Blink your beautiful eyes for me once if it’s a yes.”

She does.

“You’re so fucking good. Too good for me.” I straighten, and her eyebrows descend; her mouth opens to say something. I hold my hand up. “You’re too good, but you’re also my prey, my win, Ken. I will take you and do things to your body that fit your position. Don’t ever doubt that.”

“Okay.” Kendall swivels her head to the front, reverting to her position.

I run the edge of the blade on her flesh, groaning to the vision of her skin denting under the pressure. My hips sway faster at the sight of the first drop of blood seeping out of her puncture wound, pressing harder when Kendall whimpers and wiggles beneath me.

The copper scent blends with the scents flowing out of both of our bodies: sex and anger and a whole lot of love. It’s a lot to take in, and yet it’s just right. Cutting her, becoming one with her, it’s exactly what we both need.

The knife cuts in deeper vertically down her back, opening another two inches of Kendall’s flesh for me. Besides the short cry, my fierce prey is brave. She remains perched on her forearms, her back arched for me to claim.

I drive the blade a little deeper, drawing more blood, a generous amount to coat two of my fingers. “Axel?”

“I promised I won’t hurt you, won’t ever try to kill you. That’s not why I need this much of your wet, slippery blood, my little.” Once my fingers are red, I move down her body, opening her butt cheeks using my clean hand. “Thing is, we don’t have lube. And I need to get in without tearing you apart.”

Her head bobs in agreement, trusting me despite it costing her a deep gash. I paint her tight asshole with her blood, sliding up and down, nudging open her little hole. She doesn’t relax, and I’m in no mood to indulge her.

“Let me in.” I press my fingertips into her pucker. “Open up, Kendall, let me fill you, let me lube you with your crimson blood.”

My words do it for her. She relaxes, her butt tight yet accepting when I push through. I’m too fucking hungry to fuck her like this, like I would on any other day. What I’m feeling, what I’m experiencing, it can’t be soothed by simply *looking*.

Dropping the knife, I snake a hand between her and the earth, finding her pussy, and raising Kendall’s hips up, angling her for my cock to sink inside her ass. She’s calm, accepting, willing.

And I’m so fucking ready. Without a word I bury myself all the way into her ass. Her body convulses, her left hand slamming on the ground.

“Fuck!” she curses. “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“My good little Kendall.” By stopping my movements, I grant her a reprieve, a chance for her muscles to stretch and accommodate to my size. “My good little prey giving in to me so well, aren’t you?”

Kendall doesn’t answer, her muscles gripping my cock even tighter. I lean in, hovering over her, licking the tiny drops of blood seeping out of the laceration I created. I’m on cloud fucking nine, but I’m not alone in this.

She needs to be present, to enjoy it. This is for her as much as it is for me.

“Baby gazelle.” I start rocking in and out of her, slowly. With the hand braced under her, I trace slow circles around her clit, and my tongue licks and tastes more of her blood.

“We’re linked in three different places,” I tell her. “In here,”—My thrust is a tad forceful for emphasis—“here”—I suck on where I cut her open.

These two actions and my hand on her bud relax her. Her ass isn’t tense; her shoulders aren’t squared. She even angles herself higher, and I moan in approval and unhinged desire into her bleeding wound.

“Where else?” she asks in a meek voice.

“Here.” I flatten my chest to her back, sliding in and out of her ass. “You feel my heart? This is where we are one.”

“We are, aren’t we?”

“Yeah.” I take my blood-stained fingers, draping them across her chin, marking her before I replicate the movement on the part of my cheek not covered by my beard. “We are.”

“Good.” Darkness envelopes her gaze, a black canvas where gold snakes lace one onto the other. “Now, fuck me.”

“What a dirty little animal you turned out to be.” I grin, stabbing my teeth into her shoulder. “Fucking love it. Love you.”

I sit up, grabbing her waist with both hands. Her hips stay high while I fuck her thoroughly, taking what’s mine and fuck apologizing for it. Each pounce is relentless as I stab her with my cock, over and over, deeper each time.

Kendall and I are pushed into this infinite universe of pleasure I never want to get out of. It’s a state of euphoria; scraping my knees on the ground

and grass doesn’t hurt, not my knees or her belly, the cold doesn’t sting our naked bodies and the cold doesn’t scare us.

The forest is a part of us, enhancing our pleasure, our raw existence.

Another drop of blood, then a second one, roll down Kendall’s tender back, more of it dripping out as my forceful thrusts rattle her pliant body. I bend to suck on her life force, stealing whatever she’ll give me, giving her back everything I’ve got.

“Come, Kendall.” I snake up to swirl my tongue in her ear. “Come with my cock fucking your virgin ass, with my fingers fucking your clit, with my tongue making love to your sweet, sweet body. Make your stepbrother proud.”

She clutches onto errant blades of grass, hyperventilating and rolling her eyes up to the back of her head. My name is a beam of light flowing out of her lips, her prayers for more a rainbow cutting through the skies after a long winter.

I could’ve never imagined I needed to be needed this badly.

“Come, baby,” I growl into her ear. “Come with me, let me make you feel good.”

Kendall obeys in that split second that I hang between heaven and hell, vibrating and squeezing me in violent pulses. I tilt her head, demand her open mouth, and roar as I spill my cum inside Kendall’s ass.

Minutes, hours, an eternity passes. The heat of our kisses drones off. Our kisses morph from one breathless entanglement into little, gentle pecks. We’re playing with each other.

We’re happy.

Kendall angles her head to rub her cheek along mine. “I didn’t think in a million years my first *I love you* would be anything like…this.”

Carefully, I slide out of her. I help her to lie on her side, lift one of her legs, entwining ours together and nuzzling her nose.

My brain, high on adrenaline and deep into possessive waters, speaks for me. “With who?”

“No one, silly.” Kendall’s innocent smile soothes me. Her cheeks darken, reddening, even in the black of the night. “That’s not entirely true. More often than not, I wished it would be with you.”

Gravity is a real thing. To anyone but me.

“Baby.” I stroke her cheek, nibbling her upper lip. “How did you want me to say it to you the first time?”

“I’m not complaining or anything,” she rushes to correct herself, eyes darting to the ground. “I love you for who you are. It was perfect.”

“I know you believe it.” I really do.

There’s no lie in her joy around me, in her complete acceptance of living out here. So much so, I haven’t even thought of bringing up asking her to move out of my dad’s house yet. We might stay here by her own volition. I just have to wait.

“But still. Tell me.”

Under long eyelashes, she glances at me. “This is how.”

I drape my gaze to our joined bodies, to her hands on my chest. Her innate tenderness meets the hard parts of me, both inside and out, and I understand what she means.

I press my forehead to hers, looking at her like I want to reach out and plow my way into her soul.

“I love you, Kendall.” My large hand covers half her face, my thumb caressing her temple. I struggle with long sentences, struggle harder with

expressing emotions. For her though, I'll go to battle with my struggles and come out the winner.

"You were the other half I never thought I'd need. Thank you for existing."

Despite my not-straight-out-of-Hollywood declaration, Kendall is elated. Her teeth flash in a wide smile, her body clinging to mine.

"I love you, Axel. From the day I walked through the door of your home, I was a little in love with you. Then a lot. And now…the most. You made that word mean something I wouldn't have experienced otherwise. Thank you for not giving up on me."

"Never." I inhale her lips, sucking her in. "Never."

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Kendall

Birds chirp over my head; rays of sunshine permeate my dreams.

Consciousness floats to the surface, and with it, a sweet kind of warmth tingles my sensitized, raw skin. It spurs memories of last night to rise to my vision. Of Axel's trust, his kisses.

His *love*. I felt it before, but hearing this strong, somber man say it? My life is finally complete.

I open my eyes to look for him, although I already sense he's not next to me.

"Axel?" My voice is groggy from sleep.

More birds.

He probably went to pee or something, I think. *Not to collect food. He promised me he would take me.*

While I wait, I put on a pink T-shirt—for him, underwear and yoga pants, then meander to the river. I brush my teeth, hurrying to return to Axel, who must be back from his toilet break.

We could watch the hopping salmon and the eagles and maybe even bears together. Everything is much better with him.

He’s not at the camp when I return. My heart dips into my stomach, circled by concerns of him regretting the love declaration or anything from last night.

I drop my toiletries back into the duffel, pave my way through the woods, and call out his name every few steps.

“Over here, Ken.”

He’s crouching next to a shrub, serious and handsome as ever while wearing dark jeans and a black T-shirt. I step toward him, mimicking his posture. My eyes wander from him to the mushrooms he’s collecting.

He tilts his head to me, lips quirking up.

And I frown.

“Ken?” His momentary joy morphs into worry. Again. “Talk to me.”

I really didn’t intend to overreact. I normally don’t. However, ten months of continuous conditioning that I’m worthless and lazy would fuck with anyone’s head.

“Do you think I’m incompetent?”

“No.” The mushrooms he held fall at his feet. He doesn’t even spare a glance at them. His whole, entire attention is aimed at me. “What makes you say that?”

I gesture to his dumped loot, shrugging my shoulders. “This.”

Deep lines crease on his forehead. He moves closer. I try to go back, falling on my butt. Axel is on me in an instant, pinning me to the ground, crowding my space.

“Are you like this because of something Ryker said? Do you think I think you’re incompetent at this because he told you you are?”

“What? No! Why would he say anything about me collecting mushrooms?” I’m about to squirm, to try and release myself out of his hold,

then remind myself he'll take it as an invitation. Which it isn't. I'm too saddened by games.

Also, I'm so…offended. Triggered.

Wounded.

"*You* collected mushrooms for me," I say. "Remember?"

"What's wrong with that?" He rubs his nose into the crook of my neck. "Tell me what I did wrong so I can fix it. I'll turn the world upside down for you. All you have to do is ask."

He's sweet, adorable. My alpha wolf. I want to take back whatever I just accused him of in my head. But I can't allow for whatever happened to repeat itself. For the sake of my mental health and our partnership.

"You promised—" Oh, fuck, why am I crying?

Axel's tongue laps at my cheeks, his lips suckling on my jaw. "Tell me."

"Why didn't you wake me?" I sputter.

The tenderness in his eyes conveys his evident confusion. He has no idea what he's done. I'm not sure whether it angers or saddens me.

"You were asleep."

I suck on my bottom lip. He studies my face inch by inch, scouring for the answer as to *Why isn't it enough?*

"You were tired, Ken." Axel bows his head, his teeth fighting me for the hold on my bottom lip in a playful and concerned gesture.

He rises to meet my eyes when I don't join his game. "Tired and cute. It was supposed to be a surprise breakfast."

"I need to know how to collect these too. To tell the difference between the poisonous and edibles. To be useful."

"What for? I'm here. I'll always feed you. I'll always take care of you."

My chin wobbles, a prelude to the intense, full-blown sobbing that follows. “So you’re b-basically saying I’m useless and an idiot that can’t learn, right?”

He’s thunder, a pulsating energy bolt prep to burst. “Excuse me?”

“I’m not some cub to protect, Axel!” I close my eyes to the onslaught of emotions. “I’m a person who needs to feel valuable!”

“You are, Little Gazelle.” Painfully tender kisses flutter on my eyelids. “You’re so clever and strong. You’re my everything.”

“I wish I could believe you.” I blink at his hurt tone, hating myself, hating the words I’m about to say. “The way things are, I feel less than. And it makes me feel like I’m nothing at all.”

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

AXEL

Have I been *this* immersed in my pursuit of learning how to survive, in my daily efforts to get Ryker off Kendall's back and uphold the memory of my mother that I completely missed out on what's going on with Kendall's psyche?

The simple act of going to collect mushrooms set her off into a near panic attack. To tears. Kendall's not the girl to cry in front of others, to lose her shit over the most insulting words.

How did I not see that, and how am I supposed to help her?

I've been around girls, fucked them. I've worked at the bar since I graduated high school, got the tattoos earlier than that with the consent of my mom. Each one had a meaning to me, to my mother and me, but the women have never cared about the meaning.

For them, it was a hot paint on the hot bartender's skin. The guy who didn't speak much and fucked like an animal and made them forget for a night about the shit life they had.

They never talked-talked to me. Even when they cried, they'd insist it was nonsense. I stuck to my broody bartender role, and let them have their

moment in peace.

Regrettably so. First, because it means I'm a dick. That goes without saying.

Second, and the most crucial, is I missed out on a lesson far more important than surviving any condition in the woods. I now stood flat in the middle inside of a storm of emotions I had no prior experience with, didn't have the first clue how to handle.

I'm mentally naked, powerless, lacking the civilized tools to heal Kendall.

To have her be better, to know I meant nothing except to look after her.

"Ken, please." I repeat the gesture she loves the most, pressing my cheek to hers, nuzzling my nose in her hair. "I'm an idiot. Please explain it to me."

"Axel, stop." She grips at the strands of my hair, failing to detach me from her. I won't. "This is serious."

I run my fingers down the length of her luscious curves. My heart pounds, my cock hardens. How could she think I see her as anything less than perfect?

"I'm just as serious." My hungry lips devour her nose, mouth, and chin with kisses. "It's either you talk to me, or I'll shower you with love."

"No one ever thought I'd become something. Anything," she chokes out, and I go statue-still to listen to her. "I shouldn't have believed you'd be the first. That anyone would."

"Hey, I think the world of you. I adore you." I'm scowling, though not at her. It's at the people who drove this intelligent, kind, and gorgeous girl to convince herself the opposite was true. "Who other than my dad said you couldn't?"

“Ryker was the last straw.” She wipes a tear, angry and torn. “The tiny piece of confidence left in me was butchered by him.”

“Who. Else?” I growl.

“Mom.” Her hiccup tears at my heartstrings. “Kids at school.”

“Out with it.” Whatever shit names they called her, I can disprove it, show her what a crock of lies they spewed.

“She…she hardly let me leave the house. Kept reminding me how at the parent-teacher conference they’d told her none of the kids wanted to hang out with me. That they were being polite in class. Behind closed doors, they’d say I’m slow and dumb. Mom told me to stay at home, that she’d save me the humiliation of asking kids to be my friends.” She sniffs. “Everyone was always nice, but I trusted Mom when she said they were fake.”

“I have a good guess why she’d tell you that. Why she would lie to you about that.” My jaw clenches, hurting my teeth. “And it’s got nothing to do with your classmates.”

A long, agonizing minute passes. “Then?”

“I hoped I’d be able to spare you from this.” Bracing myself, I trudge forward. She deserves the truth. “When Mom passed, I did some digging. To find incriminating shit on my dad. Evidence I could take to the sheriff, to redeem myself from the failure to protect Mom.”

“Oh, Axel.” Kendall hugs my neck.

I suck in a long breath, accepting her love, reminding myself a show of affection does not equal pity. Sometimes affection is sharing a heart. Which is what Kendall and I have.

“It’s not about me.” I clear my throat of the guilt I’ve been carrying day and night, ripping out the Band-Aid. “It’s about *them*. Our parents. Letters

of their affair for the past fifteen years were hidden in Ryker's safe."

"What does that have to do with lying to me?"

"I guess she didn't want you catching them sneaking around. Maybe she didn't want you listening to folks' gossip about them. Probably both." Brushing my lips to her forehead, I inhale her scent before returning to meet her gaze. "Either way, I can guarantee the whole school excuse was a lie. No one thinks you're dumb, because you're not."

She's not crying anymore, expanding her lungs. "Axel, could you do something for me?"

"Anything."

"I get you care about me—"

"I *love* you."

Her croaky chuckle tells me I've done something right. I lean almost all my weight on her, twirling a strand of her hair around my finger.

"Could you take me, and explain what's edible and what's not?" Little fingers clasp over mine, sealing our lives together.

"Absolutely," I encourage her, now that I'm aware of where she's coming from.

"I wouldn't feel like an idiot if you trusted me to be your partner."

I'm two seconds from clawing my eyes out. It's such a simple request, and such a simple solution, and I was so fucking blind. For ten months I heard her being called every name in the book. How could I not have seen the impact it had on her?

How could I overlook it? Tell her through my actions what my father said in words?

I'm such an idiot.

“I’m sorry for not paying attention.” I straighten myself, sitting on my knees. “It’ll be the last time. Never again. We can finish collecting mushrooms together, then we’ll fish. Together.”

She shakes her head at my offered hand.

“No?”

“Later.” My woman cups my cock through my jeans. “There’s something else you can give me now.”

“Anything.”

She doesn’t hesitate to say, “Let me watch you.”

My fingers are slipping down to the button of my jeans.

Then she adds, “And watch me in return.”

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Kendall

Did I really just say that?

I definitely thought it.

Axel peels off my leggings and underwear while regarding me with the filthiest, hungriest glare I've ever witnessed on him. He flicks his finger on my needy center, then spreads my legs for him before moving back.

Oh yes, I definitely said that out loud.

Because I wanted it. I should not be ashamed. I am *not* ashamed.

I've allowed cruel, heartless people to dominate my life. It's about time to end it.

There's no room for them here, no permission to come between Axel and me.

"My filthy Little Gazelle," he purrs, sniffing my underwear in his palm.

His gaze pierces my soul. The slow, deliberate lick of his bottom lip elicits a cold shiver to run down my spine.

"Nothing and I mean nothing I've smelled is as sweet as your cunt." One-handedly, Axel undoes the top button of his jeans, pulling down the

zipper. He’s gone commando today, his thick, veiny cock jutting out to land in his palm. “Nothing gets me as hard.”

Devoid of shame as I transcend to be the woman I was always supposed to be, I bend my knees, tracing my fingers to my center. I spread my folds, locating the little pebble that is my clit, where I ache for it the most.

Tingles spark life to my core; being touched and watched exceeds my craziest expectation. Back home, holed up in my room, I used to touch myself fantasizing about Axel. My mind would conjure his rugged face looming over me, his calloused hands ravaging my body.

My orgasms would shatter me, scorch my skin. Back then.

In hindsight, they were child’s play. My past definition of hot is an iceberg compared to this.

Subjected to his primal glare, to his crass words, and his member in his hand, they’re nothing.

“Touch yourself,” I beg.

Axel stirs from his idle position, stroking his length. I pause my movements, glaring at him in awe. He’s so beautiful in his raw form, a God. His satisfied growl casts a lasso around my attention, forcing me to his face, to the deviant snarl of his mouth.

“Don’t stop.” His stroke has me looking down to where he fists himself. He swipes his thumb over the wet tip, getting his arousal all across the pad of his finger. “Keep watching me, keep looking at what it is you do to me.”

The heat is almost insufferable as I comply, my moans are helpless cries. Axel’s low rumbling sounds consummate with mine, knotting us into a living bind.

He shoves his jeans to his knees, continuing to crawl toward me on one hand, eyes fixated on my lips. “Open up, Little Gazelle.”

I do it before he finishes the sentence. My tongue peeks out in my despair to have him in my mouth, my fingers pinching my nipples to ease the growing ache.

“That’s right, taste how badly I want you.” He shoves his cock into my expectant mouth.

My teeth graze the silky flesh, lips tight while I suck on his precum. Hungry, starved, semi-delirious.

“Fuck,” he grunts.

He leaves my mouth empty, kicking his boots off, ridding himself of his jeans using his feet. When he’s back on his knees between my thighs, he continues following my request, pleasuring himself and watching me do the same.

Blue eyes fixate on my rubbing fingers and my glistening clit as Axel strokes himself harder. I’m hypnotized by the sight of him, at how he handles himself, swiveling his palm up and down the length of his impressive shaft.

His blond strands of hair fall around his face, his brow furrowed in concentration, serious and erotic and mine. The attentive man he is, he notices my attention traveled to his face and not his cock. He tilts his chin up, his lips quirking to the side.

“Looking at my face gets you hot, Ken?”

“Y-yes.” I rub myself faster.

While I’m mesmerized by those dark, gorgeous eyes, Axel sneaks one up on me. Two of his long fingers are shoved deep into my slit, curling inside, thrusting furiously.

My yelp eggs him on to go faster, deeper inside me.

“Cheater.” My accusation is void of anger.

“You said watch and be watched.” He massages the inside of my walls; the sin coursing through his fingers is reflected in his glare. “There weren’t any rules stating what *not* to do.”

I wouldn’t have been able to articulate what he’s doing to me regardless of what words were at my disposal. It’s so decadently perfect that I arch into his touch. Both of us rubbing ourselves faster, drowning in this moment. In us.

My back and behind are scathed, bitten, cut, and probably bleeding. It should hurt, yet it doesn’t. If anything, the fresh wounds and contusions enhance the addictive sensations. It makes me feel Axel everywhere; I watch him masturbate at my front, and feel his marks at my back. I want for nothing.

“You’re mine, Kendall. Forever.”

“I am,” I pant, transported to a space high above the floor, only grounded by the sight of him. “I am.”

He places his hard length against the line connecting my thigh and my pussy. Grinding himself on top of me, he pushes himself hard on my body. He’s fisting himself at the base of his cock, his rough knuckles grazing the side of the palm I’m pleasuring myself with whenever his lean body pummels forward.

His legs move to bracket my left thigh. “Show me, then.”

Axel taps the broad crown of his cock on my clit, slapping it during the intervals where my deft fingers move to the side. God, how I feel him. How I *want* him.

“Let me see what *I* do to *you*. I want this pussy squeezing my fingers when you come all over me.”

The question *What about you* forms on my lips, but it never really leaves. Axel is relentless in his race to pleasure me, cornering me into submission.

I succumb to him, and my orgasm implodes brutally, tearing my insides, creating a new and improved person in the process. Much like the others that had preceded this one, I don't get to revel in it.

Axel's low hum joins his impatience movements. He withdraws his fingers from my pussy, driving his hands under my body to scoop me up.

Flustered and disoriented, I look at him for answers. "Where are we going?"

"To the river." He lowers his eyebrows, his heat blending into my heat. "You're going to get a lot dirtier before you're cleaned up."

"Oh." My cheeks are two balls of fire.

"I won't be kind to you."

Sounds of the river carry to my ears, the splashes I've come to know clashing against the rocks and down the stream. They're no match to the obscene drums thrumming in my head, to my pulse wreaking havoc under my skin.

The calamity is an expression of my sheer, unadulterated excitement from the idea of us letting our most carnal desires loose.

I can barely wait.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

AXEL

I stand at the edge of the river where it reaches my ankles.

I eyed this location yesterday. Beneath the shallow water lies a long patch of soggy grass, not a rocky area like the majority of the river. Sunbeams fall across the forest, their rays hitting the waters and creating a mirage of a million diamonds.

Although they're no match to the brightest diamond who is the girl I'm holding.

I've loved her in this river for many hours this week. It only seems fitting we'd come full circle and fuck ruthlessly here as well.

"What are you waiting for?" Her small voice pulls me out of my distracted mind.

I dig blunt fingernails into her sides. "Greedy."

Her fingernails sink into my chest in retribution, scratching her own marks of ownership on me. With a lecherous glare and a husky tone, she growls, "Very."

Our lips collide in a feverish kiss as I get down on my haunches, her in my arms. Once on the ground, I toss her into the shallow water, tugging at

the hem of her shirt and whipping it over her head.

Mine goes next. Both of us are stark naked.

Our heaving breaths mingle until hers catches in a surprised gasp when I flip her to her side. Leaving her right legs underwater, I'm hiking up the left, placing her little foot at the crook of my neck while straddling her lower leg.

Ken is quick to accommodate, bracing herself on her elbow, head above water. Her auburn hair whirls inside the river, her bright blue eyes darkening when I start rubbing her clit.

She's a reflection of my own desires—feral, bestial, and in desperate need.

"You're in heat, aren't you?" I slide inside her in one stroke, the water and her eager pussy sucking me in. "Desperate for my cock."

"Yes."

Between watching her rubbing herself earlier and the wild look that's taken over her, grace is beyond me. My hips strike her ruthlessly, my balls slapping on her ass. Water sloshes around us in waves, in tandem with her large set of breasts.

"More." The sweet call of my siren reverts my attention to her face.

I don't think twice, biting down into her luscious calf hard. Her tortured moan heaves out of her; the fierce pain has her nearly dropping her head under the water.

She recovers, glaring up at me with her chin dripping wet, mimicking my snarl. "Just do it, Axel. Make. Me. Yours."

"You *are* mine."

My fingers drag lower toward her ass, injuring precious skin. Her pucker is stretched wide the way I'm splitting Kendall wide open, though still very

fucking tight for my whole index finger to sink in.

Not that it matters, it won't stop me from doing it.

Kendall's euphoric cry as I plunge the finger up to the bottom knuckle. Her ass cheeks press together, her legs, on a reflex, jolting to escape the pain.

The harsh lines around her eyes, though, they tell a different story. "Don't stop. Don't fuck me like I'm weak. Fuck me like the prey you fought hard to get, like you would to one that fought back."

Less than an hour ago, Kendall asked me something similar while in tears. As she lies below me now, she's furious. Her demons are gone; her spirit resembles that all-powerful gazelle she claims to be.

I see it. I see *her*.

And it turns me mad with insuppressible aggressions. I pound hard into her, to make her strong against everyone who's ever hurt her, to prove to her I'll never belittle her.

In this whirlwind of rage, I add another finger to her ass and she clenches. I don't relent, sinking both deep within her. My cock drives harder and faster into her pussy, causing her to lose her grip on the smooth surface.

For a moment, her savage-slash-angelic face falters, falling beneath the surface.

If you consider me someone who'd find that alarming while I'm balls deep into Kendall's pussy and my fingers burrow ruthlessly into her ass—then you haven't been paying attention.

I find it compelling, instead. Insanely erotic.

It's a glimpse to another idea she awakens in me, of how beautiful she'd be battling to come out from under. My dick pummels in and out of her, my

fingers out of her ass, wiped on the watery ground before I put them to good use.

“I’ll never hurt you.” I grab a fistful of her behind, hurting every patch of her skin up her body.

Her eyes widen, pupils dilating. Even though we’re partially in the water and our bodies clash against one another in an insane rhythm, I sense her pulse. And it’s skyrocketing.

She’s in a flight-or-fight mode, the sexiest fucking way to have her.

“I won’t.” I inch my hand higher, pushing it beneath her lush hair and wrapping each one of my fingers around her delicate neck. “It’ll really look like it, though.”

We lock glares; hers is defiant, ready to go to war. I can’t see myself, but judging the red haze blurring my vision, I guess I exude the rawness I feel inside, my body’s command to take her. The thrill that makes me rock-fucking-hard has to reflect in my eyes.

“Deep breath, Little Gazelle,” I growl, extending her a short second.

It’s gone before she knows it.

Then I lean my weight on Kendall and drown her.

She stares at me from under there in shock, her heel sinking into my shoulder. The sight thrusts me to the brink of complete and utter madness; my balls tighten and my pounding in and out of her increases in strength and speed.

It’s not to say I’m not conscious enough to bring her back up. Nothing like it.

Applying the same force I used to put her underwater, I draw her head up to the surface.

I pause, examining my woman as she sucks in a sharp intake of air. Drops of sweet water roll down her eyelashes, the tip of her nose, her round chin.

She shoves the red strands of hair glued to her cheek out of her eyes, squeezing her thighs around me.

“Again.”

“I remember my little prey told me she’d fight me.” I push her down so the water reaches just below her eye. “You haven’t.”

Kendall’s ominous, low roar is another response she picked up from me.

Can’t say I’m disappointed.

“You’re gonna lie there again,”—when I raise her head an inch up, her teeth bare to me—“or are you going to fight?”

Her eyes narrow. “Do your worst.”

At the hissed challenge, I put her under.

“Fight me.” I ground my cock deep into her.

She can’t hear me, but she understands me all the same. Bubbles float to the surface at her scream, hair waving as she thrashes her head inside the water. Her nails claw at my forearm, drawing blood.

I drag her out, trail her bottom lip with my thumb.

“I fucking love you, woman.”

“I love you.”

Back inside.

Giving as hard as she takes, she’s kicking and screaming. It’s a game and it also isn’t. It’s an exhibition of her power. Then it suddenly hits me—I realize I’m so turned on that I hurt. Everywhere.

And surprisingly, the part that hurts the most isn’t my rock-hard cock dying to spill inside her—it’s my heart.

“I love you,” I tell her again when I thrust her up to the surface.

Through clenched teeth and a violent gaze, she repeats, “I love you back.”

I can hardly see straight when I manhandle her into the missionary position, pinning her down by straddling her on either of her waist.

This time when I drag her under, I’m right there with her.

Her unexpecting eyes grow impossibly large, her pink, lush lips parting in a gasp. One large air bubble floats out of her. I swallow it, molding our mouths together.

The pressure of my hand at the bottom of her neck arches Kendall upward.

I bite her bottom lip. She clutches at my hair.

I pummel into her. She squirms beneath me.

We come up for air, gasping.

Her cheeks are ruddy, her scent so prominent not even the water can mask it.

She’s about to come.

So am I.

The utmost wonderful voice in the world demands, “Again.”

“With me.”

Her fervent nod is the approval I seek. I pull us both beneath the cool stream one final time, lapping my tongue against hers as I fill every inch of her pussy with my cock. I claim her with my strokes, command her by pinching and tugging her clit.

When it finally happens, when time stands still and breathing becomes redundant, Kendall sucks my cock further in. Her orgasm is my orgasm, and I unload into her in the long seconds she pulses on my cock.

There’s something to be said about experiencing a climax while enclosed in your own little universe.

I’m inside a void where it’s only me and her.

I don’t have to force concentration; my senses are being shut down by my environment, forcing me to see, breathe, and live *her*.

I don’t have to search for that elusive oneness; it’s already there.

Kendall and I were never more united than we were at that moment.

And through this togetherness, a pacifying, complete notion courses through me.

I love her.

I need her.

I’m putting a baby in my Little Gazelle’s belly.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Kendall

I’m not walking. I’m levitating.

My feet tread the ground, sand clinging at my soles; grass filters between my toes. But I’m not really here. It’s purely a costume I’m wearing, my shell. I’m elsewhere, above the clouds, just me, my love, and the skies.

Hours after Axel and I played and kissed and loved each other in the river, I doubt whether any part of us is truly on planet earth anymore. We’re on this higher plane flying over the rest of the world, our souls meshed together in this heavenly space reserved for the two of us alone.

“My little Kendall is smiling.” Axel stares down at me, adoration radiating from his eyes. He hugs me to his side, trailing his index finger along my jaw as we head toward camp. “And mine. Forever mine.”

“You’re mine too, you know.” I fall into his touch.

“The only way I want to be.”

He’s smiling back at me. And then he’s not. Axel has my full attention, so I see the slightest change in him. He’s sniffing, eyes squinting in anger, chest heaving with each harsh, rugged breath.

“Someone’s been here.” He doesn’t even have to tear his gaze toward where we’ve slept the past few days to know it.

He just does.

The hairs on his arms prickle and his teeth bare in a snarl. The happiness resting in my heart smashes into smithereens. If something has Axel reacting like this, it can’t be anything good.

Gingerly, I follow Axel’s gaze. Then I see it. A cry and a “No,” slip past my lips.

Axel growls, fastening his hold on my shoulder.

Which becomes seriously helpful when my knees buckle and give out from under me.

“Our stuff.” I’m unable to look anywhere except the botched camp.

The blankets were torn to shreds, duffels slashed through the middle. Our pot and pan crooked at the handle, other utensils strewn around, food is gone.

Last but not least—and arguably the worst—my women’s hygiene products are everywhere. They were ripped out of their packets, a mess of a tampon here and a pad there for Axel to see.

“Oh, Axel,” I sob, the sound a result of the earthquake rupturing my chest.

He senses my imminent collapse fast, and capable, tattooed arms pick me off the ground. This thin boy proves to me time and again his innate strength, and helps me to sit down on a grassy patch.

“Shh…” he mumbles into my damp hair. He brushes my long locks in repetitive, soothing motions, rocking us back and forth. “It’ll be okay, Ken. Don’t worry. I’ll make everything better.”

The shock and desolation wash over me in waves, a tsunami demolishing the incredible day Axel and I had. I need a moment to cry it out, and Axel doesn't admonish me for it. Doesn't call me stupid or sensitive.

"Don't worry, baby gazelle." He strokes his cheek to mine, repeating himself, "It'll be okay. I'll make it better."

Minutes in his arms are the equivalent of a lifetime of therapy. Not that I was ever sent to a therapist, but I couldn't imagine anyone would compare to the healing quality of his voice and touch.

My eyes flutter shut. Moments later, soft lips and a thickening beard graze my cheeks. Kisses are being sprinkled across my face, and Axel's knees fold me deeper into his hard chest.

"My little one, talk to me."

Slowly, I return to reality, peeking out from under heavy eyelids. Axel's dark blues collide with my light ones, pouring into them his quiet and serene nature.

"Who would do this?"

"Bears would be my guess." His brows knead together, muscles tensing. "I'm so fucking stupid. I'm sorry. I should've been more careful."

"Axel…" I start comforting him.

"No." He shakes his head, his hair tickling my face. "No, I won't allow you to forgive me this easily. I should've brought bear deterrent spray. I have it in my dresser. And to think I gave you shit about what to pack."

Any other person who wouldn't have known my Axel as I do would've been a bit stumped by this piece of information, of him having a bear deterrent spray at hand. I can totally see it happening, though. It actually pulls at my lips, landing me back my smile.

Axel mirrors it, though his is rueful. "I'm sorry I failed you."

I rear my head back, cupping his jaw. “Why in the world would you say that? You could never fail me.”

“Because…” He bows his head. His rough palm strokes my arm, fondling the sleeve of my damp shirt. “It means we’ll have to admit defeat. You haven’t stayed here long enough for Ryker to take you back.”

As I’m digesting the repercussions of what he’s spelling out to me, Axel’s gaze trails slowly back up. Hope, not sadness, flickers behind his eyes. “Maybe we don’t have to go there?”

“Don’t have to go there,” I murmur, mostly to myself.

“Yes.” He engulfs both my palms in his big ones. “We’ll get away from Ryker and Claire. Settle in a small town, somewhere near a forest. Build our own family. Have a million kids. Camp whenever possible.”

In a swift motion, he topples us to the ground. He lies on his back, bringing my head to his chest, stroking my belly as if I’m already bearing his child in it. “Please, say yes.”

It’s tempting. A life together, unbothered by his murderous father and my incompetent mother. Have Axel’s babies. Live a life of unconditional happiness and love.

Except… “I can’t.”

“It’s too soon.” His voice is distant. “I understand.”

I’m quick to rise to my knees and trap him between my legs. “It’s not. I love it here. I love being with you here. You could ask me to move to a whole other state, another country, and I’d still do it wearing the biggest smile. Anywhere on this planet is my preferred place if it’s where I get to be with you.”

The light on his face is an expression I’m all too sorry I can’t bottle up and savor for a lifetime. “You would?”

I stroke his hair, nodding. “I would. I love you.”

“I love you.” Axel bites his bottom lip, then flips me on my back, a curious gaze regarding me. “So, why not?”

“My mom.” I sigh. I try averting my eyes from the embarrassment climbing up my throat. It’s stupid to care for a woman who’s probably forgotten about me.

Axel grips my chin, forcing my attention on him.

“I don’t think any of your reasons are stupid,” he claims as if reading my mind. “Tell me what they are.”

“What if he’ll use this excuse that I failed to ban her from talking to me?” I let the words fall out, believing Axel’s promise. “I have to do whatever I can to not let it happen. I might be hurt by her now. In the future, though, it could change. I don’t want to regret this day, Axel, please don’t make me.”

Creases form on his forehead. I have a good assumption as to why, and I say what’s been brewing in my head, “She had an affair with your dad. She deserves to be condemned for *that*. Not for your mom’s murder. She’s not a murderer.”

“Okay.” His trepidation dissolves; his agreement is final. “I’ll tell you what. We can stay here. On one condition.”

Hope fills my eyes, igniting my heart to race forward. “What?”

“It’s getting late, and it’s a long walk to our car.” He kisses my nose, encouraging me to smile. “I spotted a house on my hikes around here. We could go there, ask him to maybe crash for the night. Tomorrow we’ll go together, buy stuff in the nearest town, and return here. How’s that sound?”

“It sounds perfect.” I watch him stand in his low-hanging jeans. Taking his extended hand, I rise to mine. “Thank you, Axel.”

He ruffles my hair. “I’m the idiot here, remember?”

“No, you’re not.”

Ignoring my protest, he smiles. “Thank you for forgiving me.”

He turns to collect a new pair of yoga leggings, socks, and a sweater off the ground for me.

Only he doesn’t hand them over. Axel snatches them toward him with my hand clutching onto the sweater. We’re nose to nose, our breaths entangled. My nipples pucker, strain in my shirt to graze his naked chest.

I finally understand this arousal scent he’s picking up on constantly. It twirls in the air, mine and his, and when I palm the bulge in his jeans, I’m proven my newly evolved sense of smell is dead on.

“You smell it, too,” he mouths.

My clothes fall to the ground, scattering around us.

“I do.” I strip him off his jeans, letting him relieve me of my clothes.

He hikes me up, legs around his waist; my ankles lace at his back. We’re moving, or maybe the world moves around us, and in a brush of wind, my back is glued to a sturdy tree trunk.

“You’ll have our babies, Ken.” He probes my folds open, massaging my clit in deliberate circles.

My head falls back, exposing my neck to him. He devours it, hungry kisses chasing delicious bites. “Say you will.”

“I will.” The scratches on my butt enhance my arousal. I’m dripping wet, ready, and painfully needy for him. “As many as you’ll like. A million of them.”

“Means I’ll have to work fast.” His lips tip up, his smile is felt on my skin, and his thick and ready cock impales me to the tree trunk.

“Yes.” I grip his hair. After that, there’s no telling what I’m saying yes to anymore. I’m chanting a prayer to him. And I love him.

Axel slams into me in his unrelenting fervor. He tweaks my nipples between his fingers, tells me he loves me, curses in abundance.

We race toward the end, and when my vision blurs from the culmination of this intense, bestial sex, my alpha's hot sperm pumps into my womb.

"I love you, Kendall." He presses his forehead to mine.

"I love you, Axel," I say, meaning it with every fiber of my being.

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

Kendall

"This is it." Axel hugs me from behind, his chin on the top of my head.

We're in stealth mode, observing the simple shed and the simple man in denim overalls chopping wood.

"Think we can trust him?" my stepbrother whispers.

I tip my head up toward Axel, unsure of what to make of this question. Knowing him, he wouldn't have brought me here before checking the guy out. His opinion is made up.

Is this him demonstrating what he talked about this morning? Does he really trust me?

"You…want my input?"

"M-hmm," he hums above me, biting back a smile while maintaining his focus on the man. "Tell me what you see, then tell me if we can trust him."

My inhale is long, the exhale longer. I fix my gaze on the man, attempting to study him with the new binoculars Axel has taught me to look through.

He wears a homey flannel shirt; his beard is brown and unruly like his hair.

But is there anything suspicious? Does the man make sharp movements? Is his gait menacing? Does he grumble to himself?

The answer to all of the above is a stark no. Mr. Lumberjack crouches to feed a carrot to a curious snowshoe hare, then pets it on its furry little head and turns to walk into his home.

Nothing is menacing about him. Truthfully, he seems nicer than how Axel behaved while we lived at home. I keep this to myself. Though I can't avoid the smile curving on my lips.

I lean into Axel's chest, stroking his hands that cover my tummy. "I think he's alright, Axel."

"I think so, too."

"Worst case,"—I turn in his arms, linking my hands around his neck and fondling his hair—"you can scare him like you did those wolves."

His chuckle rumbles low in his chest. The sound flutters into mine, runs down my stomach to finally rest in my core. Heat builds in my body again, making the option to sleep on torn blankets and eat raw mushrooms while Axel takes me for hours far more enticing.

"Last time I checked, you had plenty of fight within yourself, Little Gazelle." Axel's nose nuzzles mine, saying in his husky, bedroom voice, "And I promise I'll give you what your body's asking of me. I'll fuck you hard and raw every day of our lives. Today, however, I need you to eat, to sleep somewhere warm."

He slithers a hand to my aching center. "Just for tonight."

I swallow. It's costing me not to grind myself on him, not to get lost in my—I really have to stop calling him my stepbrother—boyfriend. "Okay."

“Let’s go.” He kisses my forehead, and we’re off.

The door to the shed is painted in light blue, another calming factor. What ill-intentioned man paints his door in such a happy, welcoming shade?

Axel raps on the door, my hand clasped tightly in his. Boots thump across the floor, their sound growing in volume until they stop. The owner of the house pulls the door open, a smile plastered on his face, which seems, up close, like he’s in his thirties.

“Hello,” he greets us the way you greet an old friend. “Nice to see human faces on this side of the forest.”

My smile doesn’t come as easy, being tired and maybe a little hesitant. I make an effort. “We can definitely say the same.”

Axel, on the other hand… He isn’t an effort-making kind of guy. His face morphs into his broody, assessing expression, only willing to extend his trust to a certain level.

“Nice to meet you, ” he formally greets lumberjack guy. He offers him his hand, his arm straight and rigid. “I’m Axel Walker. This is my girlfriend, Kendall McQueen.”

Girlfriend. I squeeze his hand, almost squealing.

For God’s sake, Kendall, he told you he loved you and you’re freaking out about a title?

Yes, yes, I am.

Axel squeezes back, not taking his eyes off our hopefully-would-be host.

“I’m Miles Williams, Jr.” Lumber-Miles’s smile broadens. “What can I do for you?”

Axel strokes my wrist with his thumb, signaling that he’s handling it. “We were camping down the forest. Unfortunately, bears raided our

campsite—”

“Fuck.” Miles averts his gaze to me. A weird emotion pulses behind his eyes. It’s there, and it’s gone. “Pardon my French, but holy hell. I hope you two weren’t there.”

I scold myself for suspecting him. Even for a sturdy man who lives in the forest the idea of a bear raid has to be scary. He’s scared, too. That’s it.

“We weren’t.” Axel’s behavior doesn’t betray that he’s noticed anything fishy. I’m sure then that I imagined it. “Thing is, they destroyed everything. We have no food or shelter left. Our car’s far and the night is falling fast.”

“Say no more.” Miles steps back, beckoning us inside the shed. “Need a place to stay for the night?”

Axel’s mouth twitches. An almost smile. “That’d be appreciated. If it’s not too much trouble.”

“Not at all. I have a sofa-bed you can crash on and had a good day hunting yesterday.” Miles tips his head toward the kitchen. “Got me a wolf, marinated it in whisky, and was about to grill it. I assume you’re hungry?”

“A wolf?” My shock is evident in my squeal and gaped mouth.

“Yes.” A look of pride adorns his face. “My family’s been living here for generations. My dad passed down the knowledge of how to treat the meat, and Mom on how to cook it. I’d say you’re in for a treat.”

“Thanks.” Axel absorbs the room, eventually landing his gaze on Miles. “Would you mind if I used your bathroom?”

Miles grins, baring a set of slightly crooked teeth. Again, a dreadful feeling sinks into my gut. I steal a glance at Axel and…nothing. Completely unperturbed.

Stop looking for things that aren’t there. Not every man that isn’t Axel is a Ryker.

“Sure.” He motions toward the hallway. “First door on the left.”

Axel’s hand slides down my back, rubbing it. “Be right back, Ken.”

“Oh, don’t you worry about her.” Miles heads toward the stove, talking over his shoulder. “I’m one of the good guys.”

Axel blatantly ignores him, leveling his eyes with me.

You’ll be okay? he asks in silence.

It’s a tough one to answer. Then again, Axel will be in the room next to us. Whether he’s going for a long or short stay there, it can’t be over five minutes. There’s nothing Miles can do to me in five minutes. He wouldn’t dare.

Axel scared off wolves; he fishes and lifts heavy duffel bags without breaking a sweat. He’s a man-beast-machine, and when I’m with him, I’m untouchable.

I signal him to shoo, sending him a reassuring smile.

He pats my head and strides off. I watch him walk, entering the bathroom and closing the door behind him.

Relaxed, after reassuring myself Miles means no harm, I start to turn around when a hand slams onto my lips.

Thick beard hair clings to my ear, a hand holding the world’s largest butcher’s knife hanging in the air before me. “Make a sound and this one goes down your throat first, your boyfriend’s second.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY

AXEL

When I left Kendall in Miles's kitchen, everything was cool. Miles seemed genuine, and I can appreciate a man living like what would have been more or less my mom's dream.

The instant I closed the door, though, the positivity drained right out of me. There was no evident reason for it; Kendall herself approved of him. And she smiled, offered me a solid reassurance that I had nothing to worry about.

But now that she's out of my sight, I do. I worry a lot.

I should've heard her sweet voice speaking, I should've smelled the wolf meat frying. Yet it's quiet and odorless here, and I just know something happened.

I can't get my zipper up fast enough. I tear open the door, yelling, "Ken?"

What Miles would make of me, this stranger growling in his home—I couldn't care less. The mere idea that something happened to her, it's incomprehensible. I react on pure impulses.

The kitchen is empty. Miles didn't so much as put a pan out on the stove.

“Kendall!” My feet stomp in the direction of the living room, the wooden floors creaking beneath my hurried, furious steps. “Kendall!”

None of them are there.

He’s taken her.

My mom who I loved unconditionally was stolen from me.

I will not let the one precious, most perfect person in my life slip through my fingers. I’m going to catch him, and I’m going to do a hell of a lot of damage before I bury him six feet under with my two bare hands.

He’ll regret the second he touched a hair on my Little Gazelle’s head.

I sprint outside the front door, looking left and right. The truck I noticed earlier is still there—a small relief. He couldn’t have taken her far by foot.

She would have resisted too, right? My fierce woman has a fight in her.

Right?

A sliver of hope fuels me, setting my legs on fire. I’m about to sprint forward, head into the forest when my nose picks up on her scent. It’s faint, stemming from somewhere behind the house, not up ahead.

Keeping my mouth shut, I prowl along the side of the house. Kendall’s scent intensifies, fear leaking out of her pores. I don’t waste time thinking about why she’s so quiet and why she isn’t fighting.

She needs me, and I’ll tear down the world for her.

I thought I was angry. I thought having the love of my life taken from me swelled a rage unlike any other within me.

That was before I caught the bastard touching her with my own two fucking eyes.

A trapdoor to an outside basement lies open, the lower half of Kendall’s body hidden as Miles makes the biggest mistake of his life by pushing her down.

The surprise element is on my side, but truth is, it wouldn't have made a difference if it wasn't. Miles could've gotten a year's worth of head start. It would be obliterated facing my blinding rage, my determination to put him down.

Kendall sees me coming, reverting her gaze quickly to her captor. She's not talking, not begging for her life as his large, filthy palm pushes her head down. It kills me to witness her subdued.

I'll kill him for it.

I hook an arm around his neck, cutting his air circulation first, dragging him far where he can't reach Kendall.

"You're going to die." Miles pedals his feet on the ground, kicking sand and dust into the air. "I'm going to kill you, then I'll feast on your girlfriend."

"You make a lot of promises for a man who won't be breathing in the next five minutes," I growl to his ear, tightening my grasp on his neck.

"That's because I have every intention of keeping them." He surprises me by bending his knees, taking me down with him.

He leverages his strength and the fact that he's twice my size to toss me to the right. He'd intended for me to topple off him and onto the sand. He'd intended for a lot of things to happen today.

Too bad for the motherfucker, none of those will come to life.

My arm remains locked on him, my boots clinging to his side.

"You're fighting the inevitable." He pries his fingers into my forearm. "You can give up now and I'll show you mercy."

"Don't need"—I climb on top of him, ignoring the stabbing pain where he scratches his fingernails, drawing blood—"your fucking mercy."

“You will.” The choked sound coming out of his neck is somehow so self-assured. “You’ll beg me to kill you when I force you to watch me rape that sweet baby in whichever hole I choose.”

I choke him harder than before, and suddenly, he stops fighting. Hoping I’ve cut his air supply and he’s about to lose consciousness, I release him slightly to lean to the side and look at him.

Only his eyes aren’t closed.

Kendall’s running toward me, screaming, “Axel, watch out!”

“Stay back!” I roar to her.

Then I get what caused her to panic. A hint of a blade gleams in the dark, Miles’s fingers curled around the handle below, next to his hips.

“No!” I glimpse her approaching.

“Stay back, Ken!” I repeat though the voice echoing in the night is hardly mine.

I’m strong and crazed enough to keep Miles tamed. Hell, I’ve taken on animals far larger than him. But there’s no knowing what’d happen if Kendall was within his reach.

If he’d dare hurt what’s mine…

Focus.

Miles is nowhere as sharp as I am. Snatching the knife out of his hand is child’s play; throwing him to the ground while I have that advantage is a walk in the motherfucking park.

He’s on his back, my knees pinning his arms to the ground. His wild stare is up at the knife I hold over his chest. My teeth are clamped together in a snarl, rugged breaths and growls seeping between them. He reeks of fear, knowing what’s coming to him.

“Please.” He suddenly sounds weak and subdued. Like he had my Kendall a minute ago.

“No fucking chance.” I raise my arm high, intent on wiping him off the face of the earth.

“Axel, please, stop!”

I growl, her siren call hardly registering past the murderous veil.

An angel engulfed by a stardust aura—or maybe it’s just my love—falls to her knees before me. She pats my hair, tugs it to the side. The action works louder than her screams. I lift my eyes to look at her without relieving an inch of pressure off the asshole’s body.

Her guttural pain penetrates through to me a fraction. Then my eyes are drawn to Miles, my mind reverting to the vivid memory of what he planned to do to my baby.

“No.” Blood pulses to my biceps, setting them to strike.

“I’ll give you the house!” the source of danger yells. “I’ll give you the house.”

“I don’t need you to give me anything.” I sense Ken’s distress, reverting my eyes to her while holding the edge of the knife tight to his throat. All he has to do is one wrong, erratic movement for it to slice right through him.

“Kendall, you’re not the first.”

“I’m so—” the asshole starts.

I drop the knife, swinging a punch at his jaw. “Look at her again and your death will be anything but merciful.”

My fingers lock his throat to the ground, allowing him short, barely there rasps for air.

“Kendall, do you hear me?” I glare right at her.

“Yes.”

“He had his mask on so easily because he’s a pro at this. He’s done it in the past and people like him, they don’t change. He’ll come back for us, or he’ll do it to someone else.” Tears prickle her eyes and my voice loses its edge in response. “You don’t want it, do you, Ken?”

“No.” She shakes her head, bowing her chin to her chest.

“Eyes on me,” I command her, smirking when she does. “Do you trust me that this is the right thing to do?”

“I do.” Her expression grows fiercer.

“Do you believe me that we don’t need him?” My fingers tighten around his throat harder. “That we don’t need *anyone* who’s out to harm us?”

“I do.” Kendall’s blues tell me she understood I’m talking about her shit of a mother in the mix. That it’s just her and me now, and our future children. For eternity.

Then she speaks, and I know I’m not imagining any of it. “Kill him, Axel. Put that animal down.”

“No!” he yells, but it’s useless.

My hand releases his throat for a quarter of a second. A short-lived relief, until my knife strikes him. Red rivers of blood gush out of his throat, spluttering out of his mouth in his futile attempts to breathe. I run the blade across, gutting every inch of his neck open.

My growl is that of pleasure, of being able to save my Little Gazelle, of avenging the wrongs that were done to her. I glance up at her, and the love in her eyes is the last piece of the puzzle. I did the right thing for her. For my family.

His body stops thrashing, his eyes close for the last time, and I spit on his useless, raping and murdering face. I rise to my feet, wiping his filthy blood on my jeans, not wanting any of it touching my woman when I hug her.

She runs to me, clashing into my chest. “I love you so much, Axel.”

“I love you.” I glance down at the woman who I’d give my life for. Her smile shines brighter than the sun; the softness of her cheek on my chest far outdoes any pillow I’ve ever laid on.

And I ask what’s been weighing on me heavier than a ton of bricks, “Why didn’t you fight him?”

She tells me everything, how she was willing to sacrifice herself for me, although she knew she wouldn’t have to. She says she knew I’d always come for her.

“From the ends of the earth, Little Gazelle.” Planting a kiss on the top of her head, I whisper, “I’ll always come for you.”

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EPILOGUE

Kendall

Four years later

Axel rubs a hand over my belly when I yelp in pain. “Baby Asher, is this any way to treat your mother?”

I gaze up at him, at my husband. He rocks our one-year-old Brooke in one arm, his dark blue eyes dancing between her, me, and Jasper, our three-year-old who’s playing with the toys Axel carved for him on our living room’s floor.

A few short weeks after we made Miles’s house our home, Axel and I discovered I was pregnant. As much as Axel experienced joy from merely looking at me, it was nothing compared to his elation over the prospect of having a baby together.

So was I.

We didn’t need anyone else. I forewent the idea of returning to my mom, cutting all ties with her. She must have had some sort of clue of what Ryker did to Axel’s mom, and for that, I could never forgive her. Ever.

I also didn’t give two shits about what others made of us. Some people gave us the stink-eye when we’d roll into town, the weird loners who lived

by themselves. They could talk all they want. I'm never leaving my husband. Never leaving my babies.

I wouldn't hesitate to kill anyone who suggests otherwise.

"It's the only time in his life that I'll allow it. That I'll encourage." I giggle, placing a hand on top of Axel's and caressing his palm. "Let the boy be his wild self."

"Whatever you say, Momma." He kisses my cheek.

"Always what Mommy says!" Jasper yelps, and we all laugh.

And so, we lived happily ever after.

My kids. My husband. My home.

Mine.

The End.

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Thank You!

Thank you so much for reading *Primal*!
If you loved Axel and Kendall's sexy shenanigans, I would be eternally grateful for your review ❤

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